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*Signed* Hutchinson & Co

# THE BIRDS OF WORDSWORTH

" Hæc scripsi non otii abundantia, sed amoris erga te."

THE

# BIRDS OF WORDSWORTH

120530

*POETICALLY, MYTHOLOGICALLY, AND COMPARATIVELY EXAMINED*

BY

WILLIAM H. WINTRINGHAM

COMPILER OF "BRITISH BIRDS: KEY TO THE PRESENT CLASSIFICATION, 1890"

London

HUTCHINSON & CO.

25, PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1892

O neat 8-15-46 RGF

THIS

TO

MY PARENTS

WITH

LOVE.

# THE BIRDS OF WORDSWORTH.

## INTRODUCTION.

"The little hedgerow birds,
That peck along the road."

*Animal Tranquillity and Decay.*

"They, and their wives and children—happier far
Could they have lived as do the little birds
That peck along the hedgerows."

*The Excursion.*

"In beast and bird a function dwells,
That while we look and listen, sometimes tells
Upon the heart, in more authentic guise
Than oracles, or winged auguries,
Spake to the science of the ancient wise."

*Humanity.*

"The untutored bird may found, and so construct,
And with such soft materials line her nest,
Fixed in the centre of a prickly brake,
That the thorns wound her not; they only guard.
Powers not unjustly likened to those gifts
Of happy instinct which the woodland bird
Shares with her species, Nature's grace sometimes
Upon the individual doth confer
Among the higher creatures born and trained
To use of reason."

*Excursion.*

LITERATURE on the works and life of Wordsworth is every year accumulating, and it may be justifiably questioned

why I thus enlarge an already enormous bulk. My answer is that in this work I have endeavoured to do for birds mentioned by Wordsworth what Mr. J. R. Tutin has done for Wordsworthian persons and places, ambitiously hoping that if this work does not commend itself to the poet's general reader it may to his earnest ornithological student.

I have selected Wordsworth's birds as the subject of this book because, after considerable comparison, I have found him not only the master but the best representative bird-poet of that polished new school which has so happily usurped the position of the tarnished old.

Mr. Harting, by writing "The Ornithology of Shakespeare," has given to the world a book which will last for all time as a collection of Shakespeare's bird references, and in it he has competently shown—taking Shakespeare's knowledge as crystallizing the general knowledge of his time—how ornithology was understood and considered three hundred years ago. With the "Lake School" a new order of things commenced, appropriate metaphors were put away, and in their stead exact truisms of refined Nature written. And we who live in times of literary culture ought ever to remember that Wordsworth was the founder of that school among the mountains, lakes, streams and flowers, and he it was who taught his colleagues to write about those things which are truly beautiful. He was master—I say master, inasmuch as his unique, for it was unique in those days, way of using his great abilities taught the

author of "The Ancient Mariner," when Mackintosh expressed astonishment at Coleridge's estimation of one so much his inferior, to say, "I don't wonder you think Wordsworth a small man: he runs so far before us all that he dwarfs himself in the distance."

I have not in any way attempted to give in this work a complete list of Wordsworth's bird references, but, having first selected his better known poems, used my discretion in further culling the most representative bird allusions to speak about. Thus I have been inevitably obliged to ignore any references occurring in his play, "The Borderers," in his too slightly-known poems the "Prelude" and the "Recluse," and in numerous other lesser poems which will not be known until Messrs. Macmillan & Co.'s new collective edition of his poems is carefully read.

To aid me in this selection I have worked almost exclusively from the "Poetical Works of Wordsworth," published in the "Chandos Classic" series.

Mine is the pleasing duty of at length being able to return thanks to those who have in any way assisted me in my work. Foremost amongst these comes Mr. A. C. Spencer, M.J.I., a friend whom I have ever been able to consult, and but for whose unceasing help and encouragement this work would yet have remained unwritten. To the late Professor Newton, editor of the first two volumes of the fourth edition of Yarrell's "British Birds." and to Mr. Saunders, who has so praiseworthily completed Newton's unfinished work and who has abbrevi-

ated the whole, I am greatly indebted; as well as to Mr. Phil Robinson, the author of a capital work on the "Poets' Birds," and Mr. Harting, who has furnished Shakespearian students with a masterpiece on the ornithology of that poet. I must also express gratification for the use of Mr. John Borough's essay, "Birds and the Poets," Mr. P. G. Hamerton's "Chapters on Animals," Rev. M. J. Watkin's "Pictures of Bird Life" —indeed a beautiful book; Rev. Morris's "British Birds," Waterton's "Wanderings in South America," Professor Knight's "Life of William Wordsworth," Miss Wordsworth's "Wordsworth," Dr. Brewer's "Dictionary of Phrase and Fable," Canon Tristram's "Natural History of the Bible," and several other authors, the benefit of whose works I have endeavoured to acknowledge where I have availed myself of them.

Wordsworth's knowledge of British birds is rich, varied, and far above the average possessed by bards, and furthermore he is transcendent. If his predecessors were ready to restrike chords in vibration, his followers have been quite as willing to prey upon his ideas. For example, is there not a probability of Wordsworth's lines,

> "The birds, high flying in the element,
> Dropped to the earth, astonished at the sound!"

forming the foundation of Lord Tennyson's "Poet's Song." This enlargement of thought is so common in literature that we should not be led by it to appreciate less the Laureate's Song; in fact, it should make

us have a higher estimation of his verses. It would be quite as ridiculous, on the other hand, to value less Wordsworth's words, "I am standing on the brink of that vast ocean I must sail so soon, I must speedily lose sight of the shore," because they possibly suggest to the minds of Tennyson students his last touching poem of "Crossing the Bar." But these comparisons should remind us—and that forcibly—that Wordsworth was a distinct master poet, leading his followers by new paths they knew not. His leadership of the poets reminds us rather of his ideal way in which children should be taught. Writing to the Rev. H. J. Rose, he said, "Natural History is taught in infant schools by pictures stuck up against walls, and such mummery. A moment's notice of a redbreast pecking by a winter's hearth is worth it all." Wordsworth wrote of things as he found them, not as they are recorded to be. But it must not be supposed that he was totally above accepting good teaching from others. He was not a plagiarist emphatically, yet provided the pre-author's line of thought ran clear and cleanly, possessing no degrading laudations of sensuality or vulgarness, he was as ready to retravel it as later poets have been to sing again the pure conceptions his mind has produced. He himself provides us with an example:—

"Is there a cherished bird (I venture now
To snatch a sprig from Chaucer's reverend brow),
Is there a brilliant fondling of the cage,
Though sure of plaudits on his costly stage,

Though fed with dainties from a snow-white hand
Of a kind mistress, fairest of the land,
But gladly would escape; and, if need were,
Scatter the colours from his plumes that bear
The emancipated captive through blithe air
Into strange woods, where he at length may live
On best or worst which they and Nature give!"

There is, moreover, an untold charm about this great master-singer. Compared with others his works may be but scantily filled with startling lines of felicitous diction, for his whole force lies in his comprehensive sincerity of accent—an accent which has done more for poetry than the richest cadences of Browning's works—for it has taught readers how to read, thinkers how to think, and all how best to view the ever-changing kaleidoscope of nature. His love of the beautiful reaped its own reward, it brought him into contact as nothing else could have done with birds. Like Waterton, Wordsworth knew how to appreciate Divine gifts, and during his lifetime birds seem to have been pretty well as familiar to him as they were to stranded Selkirk. In his poem of the fancy, "A Flower Garden," he tells us—

"Hither throngs of birds resort,
Some, inmates lodged in shady nests,
Some, perched on stems of stately port
That nod to welcome transient guests."

And our imagination can picture the scene which encouraged him to write—

"When Philoctetes in the Lemnian isle,
Lay couched;—upon the breathless monument,
On him, or on his fearful bow unbent,
Some wild bird oft might settle, and beguile
The rigid features of a transient smile,
Disperse the tear, or to the sigh give vent,
Slackening the pains of ruthless banishment
From home affections, and heroic toil."

And with all his love of birds in their natural state of uncaged freedom, he never lost sight of the fact that man's ingrafted inclination is to possess a fondling. If it may be said that Charles Kingsley knew this when he wrote of Ayacanora as the cherished plaything of the *Rose's* crew, so it may be said of Wordsworth when he wrote—

"One morning (raw it was and wet,
A foggy day in winter time)
A woman on the road I met,
Not old, though something past her prime:
Majestic in her person, tall and straight;
And like a Roman matron's was her mien and gait.

"The ancient spirit is not dead;
Old times, thought I, are breathing there;
Proud was I that my country bred
Such strength, a dignity so fair;
She begged an alms, like one in poor estate;
I looked at her again, nor did my pride abate.

"When from those lofty thoughts I woke,
'What treasure,' said I, 'do you bear
Beneath the covert of your cloak,
Protected from the cold damp air?'

She answered, soon as she the question heard,
'A simple burden, sir, a little singing bird.

"'I had a son,—the waves might roar,
He feared them not, a sailor gay!
But he will cross the deep no more:
In Denmark he was cast away;
And I have travelled weary miles to see
If aught which he had owned might still remain for me.

"'The bird and cage they both were his:
'Twas my son's bird, and neat and trim
He kept it; many voyages
This singing-bird had gone with him;
When last he sailed, he left the bird behind:
From bodings, as might be, that hung upon his mind.

"'He to a fellow-lodger's care
Had left it, to be watched and fed,
And pipe its song in safety;—there
I found it when my son was dead;
And now, God help me for my little wit!
I bear it with me, sir! he took so much delight in it.'"

There is no selfishness in the character of the Lake poet; birds exist, every man has an equal right to make the best use they can of them—providing that use does not encourage wanton destruction. He knew also, what few appear to properly understand, birds play a prominent and exceedingly valuable part in the world they inhabit. He knew that besides being useful as atmospheric scavengers they are absolutely indispensable to the distribution and the existence of plants:—

"The thing had better been asleep,
Whatever thing it were,
Or breeze, or bird, or dog, or sheep,
What first did plant you there."

Wordsworth could say as truthfully as Ovid, *Facta canam ; sed erunt qui me finxisse loquantur*, and this has forced me to make this work somewhat comparative. He sang facts, leaving fiction—and folklore too, to a certain extent, to others. And though he invents no new bird like Spencer, Milton, Shelley and Savage, singularly enough, he has been accused of writing about one unique species the production of his own mind. His knowledge of—

"Birds with plumage bright;
Gifts which, for wonder or delight,
Are brought in ships from far,"

is limited or withheld from criticism. Being a British Nature poet the latter supposition is probably the truer one. Once in the "Excursion" we find him mentioning—

"A poor singing-bird from distant lands,"

and again in the same poem he tells of—

"The Indian bird
That writhes and chatters in her wiry cage."

"Rural Illusions" provides us with the reference :—

"Sylph was it? or a bird more bright
Than those of fabulous stock?"

Nor has Wordsworth much to tell his readers about specific foreign birds. He mentions the Ostrich several times, and in his "Song for the Wandering Jew," he says—

> "The fleet ostrich, till day closes
> Vagrant over desert sands,
> Brooding on her eggs reposes,
> When chill night that care demands."

The Peacock is written of in "The White Doe of Rylston."

> "The Peacock in a broad ash-tree
> Aloft is roosted for the night,
> He who is proud prosperity,
> Of colours manifold and bright
> Walked round, affronting the daylight."

He hints at the old legend of the Mother Pelican :—

> "For my spirit relished
> Strangely the exasperation of that land
> Which turned an angry beak against the down
> Of her own breast."

And he has written two poems on pictures of the Bird of Paradise.

Waterton's "Wanderings in South America" were also studied by the poet, and this book was instrumental in encouraging him to write the passages :—

> "Toll from thy loftiest perch, lone Bell-bird, toll."
>
> *Stanzas on the Power of Sound.*

> "So westward, tow'rd the inviolated woods
> I bent my way; and, roaming far and wide,
> Failed not to greet the merry mocking-bird;
> And, while the melancholy muccawiss

(The sportive bird's companion in the grove)
Repeated, o'er and o'er, his plaintive cry,
I sympathized at leisure with the sound."

*Excursion.*

And—

"Through border wilds, where naked Indians stray,
Myriads of notes attest her subtle skill,
A feathered task-master cries 'Work away'!
And in thy iteration 'Whip-poor-will'
Is heard the spirit of a toil-worn slave
Lashed out of life, not quiet in the grave."

It is, however, not with foreign species, whose characteristics are only to be studied in books, that Wordsworth is at home and familiar, but with British birds. These he seems to have cherished as a mother cherishes her child. His sympathy goes out towards them illumed with a radiance of unconstrained recognition, and much and varied is the information he has to impart about them. He even chronicles as well as Shakespeare the different arts practised to steal the liberty or life from these little creatures within his experience :—

"A snare
. . . . . like the lime
Which foolish birds are caught with."

*Sonnets.*

"Like a poor bird entangled in a snare
Whose heart still flutters, though his wings forbear
To stir in useless struggle."

*Land.*

"Darting like a wounded bird."

*The White Doe of Rylstone.*

"Scattered, like birds escaped the fowler's net."
*English Reformers in Exile.*

"Yet was the mind to hindrances exposed,
Through which I struggled, not without distress
And sometimes injury, like a lamb enthralled
'Mid thorns and brambles; or a bird that breaks
Through a strong net, and mounts upon the wind
Though with her plumes impaired."
*Excursion.*

He sees also the result of nest robbing—

"Like a poor bird—her plundered nest
Hovering around with dolorous moan."

There is one thing—

. . . . "More desolate, more dreary cold,
Than a forsaken bird's nest filled with snow
'Mid its own bush of leafless eglantine,"

and that is a bird's nest forsaken containing dead young.

The more we study the ornithology of Wordsworth the more two facts strike us. (1) Wordsworth knew how to love, and (2) he loved birds.

"There did they dwell—from earthly labour free,
As happy spirits as were ever seen;
If but a bird, to keep them company,
Or butterfly sate down, they were, I ween,
As pleased as if the same had been a Maiden Queen."

The trueness of his mind is laid open to view when he advises a child to—

"Say not you *love* a roasted fowl,
But you may love a screaming owl."

Wordsworth was not prepared to love everything indiscriminately, as society puppets of the present day claim to do; he knew too well that—

> "Likings come, and pass away;
> 'Tis *love* that remains till our latest day."

With this came an opposeless knowledge how best to love, followed by an understanding of the best things to love, the—

> "Countless blessings which God sends."

He recognised birds as one of the great blessings God bestows on His people, and during his rambles, liked, as I have before shown, to have their company. When he said—

> "Then peck or perch, fond flutterer! nor forbear
> To trust a poet in still musings bound,"

did he not even exhort "the hosts of birds that wing the liquid air," to stay by him? That the "feathered throng" valued his incitement we know, for he tells us himself of wild birds that gathered round his porch.*

In the garden of the Tuileries lived an old man, saddened by the loss of those he loved; in the heart of the English Lake district Wordsworth lived, saddened somewhat by the ingratitude of a thankless nation. The old man of the Tuileries sought consolation in his solitude, and found it in the friendship of birds. Did

*An instance is recorded by Dorothy Wordsworth in her Grasmere Journal of a bird perching on her brother's leg in the orchard.

not Wordsworth also find some consolation in the company of the "winged dwellers on the leas," when his "Miscellaneous Sonnets," "Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty," and his "Memorials of a Tour in Scotland," had been assailed with a fierceness of animosity and a licence of language wholly disproportioned to the faults condemned. When sickened by the hostility and obloquy of his critics, disappointed again and again by the ungenerous disregard and even contempt with which his poems were received, can we not picture him seeking the more congenial associations of nature? Wordsworth was an "out-of-door" poet. Lately we have learnt that his house was not so remarkably pleasant as generally depicted. This discomfort I admit may have made itself prominently manifest physically, but it can have exercised no disturbing influence in his love. Who would appreciate birds were he forced to seek their haunts?

He had not to return home and await candle-light inspiration or burn the midnight oil ere he wrote—he worked on the spot. Thus we find him writing in March, while he rests on the bridge at the foot of Brother's Water. We came across him drawing ideas and committing his song to paper amongst the ruins of a castle in North Wales, and anon he passes us penning imperishable lines riding on the Dover coach. "Walking," says Shairp, "is the least expensive, so it is the best way in which a poet can see a country. Walking alone, or with one congenial friend, he can stop, and gaze, and listen, and

saunter, and meditate at his will, and let all sights and sounds of nature melt into him, as in no other way they can." Wordsworth was never a rich man, and *blessed* by limited poverty he walked,* viewing the natural world with a vision that saw farther into the heart of things than have done the majority of bards. How beautifully Wordsworth has answered Charles Lamb's statement, "No true poem ever owed its birth to the sun's light!" No angry controversy could have answered the essayist's words as Wordsworth answered them by his actions.

"I never hear," said Burns, in one of his letters, "the loud solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon, or the wild mixing cadence of a troop of grey plovers in an autumn morning, without feeling an elevation of soul like the enthusiasm of devotion or poetry," and Wordsworth had pretty well the same feeling :—

> "The birds around me hopped and played,
> Their thoughts I cannot measure;
> But the least motion which they made
> It seemed a thrill of pleasure."

And these "thrills" penetrated to his inmost heart and taught him not to be loth to—

> "Sympathise with vulgar coppice birds
> That, for protection from the nipping blast,
> Hither repaired."

---

*De Quincey calculates that long before the close of a vacation spent in a walking tour through Switzerland, Wordsworth had walked nearly 200,000 miles.

## THE SONG OF BIRDS.

"Then sing, ye birds, sing, sing a joyous song
And let the young lambs bound
As the tabors sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts to-day,
Tell the gladness of the May."

"The showers of the spring,
Rouse the birds, and they sing."

In the autumn let the melodious thrush pour forth his rapturous song thrice as grandly as he does at present! Give the robin a greater repertoire! Entice the starling to chatter; the crow to caw more lustily! Hurry, by noise, the wild swan, make his wings whistle louder! Disturb the "frank, frank" out of the heron; frighten a cry from the curlew; listen to the wailing of the partridge; let the gold-crest's sharp notes pierce your ears! Stay and listen to the call-note of the greenfinch, to the "Spink, spink, spink," or the "Toll-toll, pretty little de'ar" of the chaffinch, or if you will, harken to the rumbling coo of the stock-dove! In the Autumn stand and listen. Force your ears to catch the slightest sound, and if by chance amongst the gradually silencing hubbub you hear a gladsome note, ventilate it, inform the

world! Autumn. Autumn is the death-bed of the year. As man proposes and God disposes, so does spring give and autumn take. Autumn steals the green from the trees and makes the darkening leaves fall piteously. Autumn either drives to bed the insect, kills it, or forces it to migrate to warmer climes. Callous autumn, time of feebleness, misery—*death?* Surely in the late autumn, if at any time, were our ears only sharp enough, we should hear sighs and groans of pain like those heard by Dante at the gate of hell. You had far better wander into your parish cemetery, hoping there to have a laugh at a comic ditty, than go into the open country while autumn is dying to hear a joyous trill; better go into Hiawatha's wigwam and expect him to break forth into a fantastic comedy while he sits on the bed of his dead Minehaha, than expect birds to warble exhilarating strains to accompany the fleeting autumnal hours.

And so Wordsworth seldom heard the chant of the "tuneful choir" in the fall of the year, it was chiefly in the spring that the notes of birds echoed in his ears. In March he heard—

> "The small birds twitter."

In June, on a still night, poetry is forced out of him, and in impromptu lines he writes—

> "The little birds are piping yet,
> Among the bushes and the trees."

And again he writes in "Hart Leap Well"—

"In April here beneath the scented thorn,
— the birds their morning carols sing."

And again he says—

"——thou shalt sing
As merry as the birds in Spring."

It is true that he speaks of—

"——old remains of hawthorn
Where small birds warble to their paramours,"

and this certainly may be quoted as a somewhat unlikely exception, but it is also true he maintains that the nipping air of September silences the birds.

And what significance has this word silence? The birds are certainly not noteless in autumn, yet because there is no joy in their autumnal songs they were still to Wordsworth, he, doubtless, caring not to put into verse the cries of the "feathered people of the boughs," during the time the struggle for existence is raging fiercely. He only sought to recall in words the sweeter strains of birds—those strains which gush from their throats while they tend with infinite love their little nestlings, or the carols of joy they fill the air with when they have completed the bidding of their Maker. I have questioned before whether Wordsworth did not find solace in the company of birds, but I need scarcely have asked, for he answers for himself, saying—

"It was the season sweet, of budding leaves,
Of days advancing towards their utmost length,
And small birds singing to their happy mates.

Wild is the music of the autumnal wind
Among the faded woods; but these blithe notes
Strike the deserted to the heart;—I speak
Of what I know, and what we feel within."

And however weighty the cares on his heart, he still seems to have heard the songs of birds and insect murmurings—

"Even so the spring
Gave it while cares were weighing on my heart,
'Mid song of birds, and insects murmuring."

Now if he went to the birds' dwellings to seek alleviation from the troubles and bitter thoughts that the critiques of his simplicity must have inspired, it was almost impossible for him to catch the piercing wild cries that have been so repeatedly introduced into the lines of both Keats and Shelley. On the other hand, it was only natural for him to hear "the pleasant clamour,"—the divine chords—of the "poets of the vernal groves." This he did, and the very screech—the soul-frighting screech—of the owl did not chafe his ears, discordant amidst the strophe of Nature, for he writes—

"I'll teach my boy the sweetest things,
I'll teach him how the owlet sings."

Nearly all his references to the song of birds point to the gaiety of their chants:—

"The birds sing a *joyous* song."

"The *pleasant* melody of woodland birds.

"Clear, loud, and lively is the din,
From social warblers gathering in
Their harvest of *sweet* lays."

"As, when a storm hath ceased, the birds regain
Their cheerfulness, and busily retrim
Their nests, or chant a *gratulating* hymn
To the blue ether and bespangled plain."

"There was a roaring in the wind all night;
The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
But now the sun is rising calm and bright:
The birds are singing in the distant woods,
Over his own sweet voice the stock dove broods;
The jay makes answer as the magpie chatters;
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters."

"'Mid the deep quiet of this morning hour,
All Nature seems to hear me while I speak.
By feelings urged, that do not vainly seek
Apt language, ready as the tuneful notes
That stream in blithe succession from the throats
Of birds in leafy bowers
Warbling a farewell to a vernal shower."

"At length, I to a sudden turning came
In this continuous glen, where down a rock
The stream, so ardent in its course before,
Sent forth such sallies of glad sound, that all
Which I till then had heard appeared the voice
Of common pleasure; beast and bird, the lamb,
The shepherd's dog, the linnet and the thrush
Vied with this waterfall, and made a song
Which, while I listened, seemed like a wild growth
Or like some natural produce of the air,
That could not cease to be."

"Has not the soul, the being of your life,
Received a shock of awful consciousness,
In some calm season, when these lofty rocks
At night's approach bring down the unclouded sky,
To rest upon their circumambient walls;
A temple framing of dimensions vast,
And yet not too enormous for the sound
Of human anthems,—choral song, or burst
Sublime of instrumental harmony,
To glorify the Eternal! What if these
Did never break the stillness that prevails
Here, if the solemn nightingale be mute,
And the soft woodlark here did never chant
Her vespers."

And

"Mellow warble, sprightly trill,
The tremulous heart excite."

The ante-penultimate quotation, which brings together the animate and inanimate, undeniably reminds us of Shelley's beautiful antiphony of shore and sea:

"The birds, the fountain, and the ocean hold
Sweet talk in music."

The voice of bird medley was apparently always pleasing to Wordsworth, and if to Byron—

"The hum of bees, the voice of girls, the song of birds"

made harmony, so to the Laureate of 1843, the "Concourse of a thousand sounds" was beautiful. In this he stands distinguished amongst the poets, and his power and love for that which is truly beautiful dissevers him from the world of petty prejudices. The

poet, the true poet at all events, writes not because he is obliged to get line and line together to make a livelihood, but because his heart is unable to hold his imaginative thoughts. What a tiny brooklet runs between the true poet of Nature's song and the song of the bird! Says Wordsworth :—

> "The birds pour forth their souls in notes
> Of rapture from a thousand throats,
> Here checked by too impetuous haste,
> While there the music runs to waste,
> With bounty more and more enlarged,
> Till the whole air is overcharged;
> Give ear, O man! to their appeal
> And thirst for no inferior zeal,
> Thou, who canst think, as well as feel."

And who—

> "Would check the happy feeling
> That inspires the linnet's song?

# Book I.

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# PASSERES.

*BOOK I.*

# PASSERES.

THRUSH—BLACKBIRD—FIELDFARE—STONECHAT—REDBREAST—NIGHTINGALE—HEDGE-SPARROW—TIT—WREN—SWALLOW—GREENFINCH—SPARROW—LINNET—JAY—MAGPIE—RAVEN—CROW—ROOK—SKYLARK—WOODLARK.

## THE THRUSH.

HAS any poet done full justice to the Thrush? Has Tennyson even by his four-versed "Throstle," paid the bird the honour it is rightly entitled to? Where is the poet who has allotted to the Song Thrush (*Turdus musicus*) that exalted position which, by its tuneful and lovely voice, it has surely gained? Although unrivalled, Wordsworth's lines do not sufficiently praise the bird:—

"Hark! 'tis the thrush, undaunted, undeprest,
By twilight premature of cloud and rain;
Nor does that roaring wind deaden his strain
Who carols thinking of his love and nest,
And seems, as more incited, still more blest.
Thanks; thou hast snapped a fireside prisoner's chain,
Exulting warbler! eased a fretted brain,

And in a moment charmed my cares to rest.
Yes, I will forth, bold bird! and front the blast
That we may sing together, if thou wilt,
So loud, so clear, my partner through life's day,
Mute in her nest love-chosen, if not love-built
Like thine, shall gladden, as in seasons past,
Thrilled by loose snatches of the social lay."

In the song-thrush we have one of our grandest singers; his chords equal in quality the nightingale's, in quantity they surpass the lark's. When will some poet come forward and give the bird its proper due? How little Shakespeare cared for the song of the mavis: only three times does he refer to the bird in the whole of his works, and even then one reference is only in a doggrel rhyme! How have other poets treated the bird? Simply as a counterfoil of other birds. Either the mavis acts the duplicate to the merle, or it is tied as horribly as Hall Caine's Red Jason is to Sunlocks to another bird, or, worse still, perhaps it is the "speckled thrush," "mottled thrush," or "greedy thrush."

Wordsworth is no exception to the rule. We find him coupling the bird inseparably to the linnet.

Here are samples of the truly pitiable position in which we generally discover the thrush:—

"The block on which these lines were traced, perhaps
Was once selected as the corner-stone
Of the intended pile, which would have been
Some quaint odd plaything of elaborate skill,
So that, I guess, the linnet and the thrush,
And other little builders who dwell here,
Had wondered at the work."

"Go, seek when Christmas snows discomfort bring
The counter spirit: found in some gay church
Green with fresh holly, every pew a perch
In which the linnet or the thrush might sing."

"But both* will soon be mastered, and the copse
Be left as silent as the mountain tops,
Ere some commanding star dismiss to rest
The throng of rooks, that now, from twig or nest
(After a steady flight on home-bound wings,
And a last game of mazy hoverings
Around their ancient grove) with cawing noise
Disturb the liquid music's equipoise."

Or maybe the songster's situation is a little varied for the better, as thus:

"The linnet's warble, sinking towards a close,
Hints to the thrush 'tis time for their repose."

The thrush can always be found "playing second fiddle" where he should, because of his superior song, play first. He is generally the shadow of some inferior substance. Grahame, in his "Birds of Scotland," says—

"How much alike in habits, form, and size
The merle and mavis! how unlike
In plumage and in song! The thrush's song
Is varied as his plumes, and as his plumes
Blend beauteous each with each, so run his notes
Smoothly, with many a happy rise and fall.
How prettily upon his parded breast

---

* Linnet and thrush.

The vividly contrasted tints unite
To please an admiring eye! So loud and soft,
And high and low, all in his notes combine,
In alternation sweet, to charm the ear.
Full earlier than the blackbird he begins
His vernal strain.

* * * * *

But now his song a partner for him gains,
And in the hazel bush or sloe is formed
The habitation of the wedded pair.

* * * * *

Securely there the dam sits all day long,
While from the adverse bank, on topmost shoot
Of odour-breathing birch, her mate plies the chaunt,
Cheers her pent hours, and makes the wild woods ring.
Grudge not, ye owners of the fruited boughs,
That he should pay himself for that sweet music
With which in blossom time he cheers your hearts.
Scare, if ye will, his timid wing away,
But oh, let not the leaden, viewless shower,
Vollied from flashing tube, arrest his flight,
And fill his tuneful, gasping bill with blood.
These two all others of the singing gems
In size surpass."

Here, besides drawing a very pretty picture of the characteristics of the bird, the poet has allotted to these two rivals their respective positions. Clare, by writing the following, has given us a fine insight into the bird's nidificating instincts—

"Within a thick and spreading hawthorn bush,
That overhung a molehill large and round,
I heard from morn to noon a merry thrush
Sing hymns to sunrise, while I drank the sound

With joy, and often an intruding guest
Watched here secret toils from day to day,
How true she warped the moss to form her nest,
And modelled it within with wood and clay.

* * * * *

And by-and-by, like heathbells gilt with dew,
There lay her shining eggs, as light as flowers,
Ink-spotted over shells of green and blue;
And there I witnessed, in the summer hours,
A brood of Nature's minstrels chirp and fly,
Glad as the sunshine and the laughing sky."

Two happily-drawn word-pictures does Wordsworth limn for us though, which we cannot despise. In the first, thus does he graphically describe the dwelling of the Throstle:—

"A single beech-tree grew
Within this grove of firs; and, on the fork
Of that one beech, appeared a thrush's nest,
A last year's nest, conspicuously built
*At such small elevation from the ground*
As gave sure sign that they, who in that house
Of Nature and of love had made their home
Amid the fir-trees, all the summer long
Dwelt in a tranquil spot."

In the second—

"Beside the cottage in which Ellen dwelt
Stands a tall ash-tree; to whose topmost twig
A thrush resorts, and annually chants,
At morn and evening, from that naked perch,
While all the undergrove is thick with leaves,
A time-beguiling ditty, for delight
Of his fond partner, silent in her nest.

'Ah, why!' said Ellen, sighing to herself,
'Why do not words, and kiss, and solemn pledge,
And nature that is kind in women's breast,
And reason that in man is wise and good,
And fear of Him who is a Righteous Judge,
Why do not these prevail for human life,
To keep two hearts together, that began
Their spring-time with one love, and that have need
Of mutual pity and forgiveness sweet
To grant, or be received; while that poor bird—
Oh, come and hear him! Thou who hast to me
Been faithless, hear him, though a lowly creature,
One of God's simple children that yet know not
The universal Parent, how he sings,
As if he wished the firmament of heaven
Should listen, and give back to him the voice
Of his triumphant constancy and love;
The proclamation that he makes, how far
His darkness doth transcend on fickle light.'"

Wordsworth puts into black and white the heavily marked and stigmatizing contrast between human and animal love. Here also we have a sketch constructed upon White, the Selborne naturalist's idea, that whenever there is incubation there is music.

The reader will readily notice the truth of the line I have put into italics.

"The nest is begun in March," says Yarrell, in his exact description of the habitation of the thrush, "and is frequently placed in the middle of a thick and tall bush or shrub, sometimes in a holly or *fir*, while occasionally this bird has been known to build in an out-house, and even, though rarely, on the ground.

The nest is formed externally of sticks, roots and moss, generally mixed with some lumps of clay; the inside is smooth and compact, being lined with a thin coating of rotten wood, and, as is said, sometimes of cow-dung, so prepared with saliva, so equally spread and cemented as to be, for a time, watertight; and such a quantity of rain-water has been found in an exposed Song Thrush's nest, as to induce the belief that the nest had been deserted as untenable."

Has Wordsworth paid sufficient deference to the thrush's song by the following representative lines:—

"Thou thrush, that singest loud, and loud and free,
Into yon row of willows flit,
Upon that alder sit;
Or sing another song, or choose another tree."

"And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher."

"A thrush sang loud."

"The thrush is busy in the wood,
And carols loud and strong."

"The shrill-voiced thrush is heedless, and again
The Monitor revives his own sweet strain."

"Hush, feeble lyre! weak words, refuse
The service to prolong,
To yon exulting thrush the Muse
Intrusts the imperfect song;
His voice shall chant, in accents clear,

Throughout the live-long day,
Till the first silver star appear,
The sovereignty of May."

Do any of these do justice to the song which is loud and clear and indescribably sweet? Do any of these snatches of praise do credit to the wonderful melodies that are so well resembled by Macguillivray in the words—

"Dear, dear, dear
Is the rocky glen;
Far away, far away, far away
The haunts of men,
Here shall we dwell in love,
With the lark and the dove,
Cuckoo and corn-rail,
Feast on the banded snail,
Worm and gilded fly;
Drink of the crystal rill
Winding adown the hill,
Never to dry.
With glee, with glee, with glee,
Cheer up, cheer up, cheer up, here
Nothing to harm us, then sing merrily,
Sing to the lov'd ones whose nest is near.
Qui, qui, qui, kween, quip,
Tiurru, tiurru, chipiwi,
Too-tee, too-tee, chiu choo,
Chirri, chirri, chooee,
Quui, qui, qui?"

Wordsworth's references are not confined to the Thrush at liberty, for he tells us:—

"At the corner of Wood Street, when daylight appears,
Hangs a thrush that sings loud, it has sung for three years:
Poor Susan has passed by the spot and has heard
In the silence of morning the song of the bird."

Such is his recognition of a bird which lives into its "teens," and which, even uncaged, exhibits singular localism, and appears almost invariably to choose one spot from which to lavish on man, like the spendthrift it is, its heaven and earth-enrapturing notes.

## THE BLACKBIRD.

SHAKESPEARE only accords the Blackbird (*Turdus Merula*) one reference—

> "The ouzel-cock, so black of hue,
> With orange-tawny bill."

Mr. Harting thinks that when Justice Shallow inquires of Justice Silence, "And how doth my cousin?" and is answered, "Alas! a black ouzel, cousin Shallow," the term "black ouzel" was used in a way equivalent to the common deprecatory term "black sheep." If Mr. Harting is correct in his conjectures, Wordsworth not only stands nearest of all modern writers to Shakespeare in imaginative power, but in an unfathomable prejudice against the mate of the

> —"timid blackbird—she, that seen,
> Will bear black poisonous berries to her nest,
> Lest man should cage the darlings of her breast."

Wordsworth does not seem to have noticed the bird—indeed, practically, he never mentions the blackbird. Once he says—

> "The blackbird in the summer trees,"
> The lark upon the hill,
> Let loose their carols when they please,
> Are quiet when they will."

In this verse the merle might just as well have been any other bird—any *black* bird with an "artless trill."

Mr. Robinson allots the line,

> "The blackbird pipers in the summer tree,"

to Wordsworth, and mentions it as inserted in "Two April Mornings," but I cannot remember ever reading the line in the Lake Poet's works, nor do I think it likely that Wordsworth would use the word "pipers" to describe the song of the "Woosell." His keen ears, I have faith, would have told him that "of all birds only the Blackbird whistleth." Did Wordsworth, who exhibited in his simple character no "littlenesses," despise, dislike, or detest the colour of the "sooty blackbird?" I can hardly think so. Yet his most loyal supporters must admit that he has entirely neglected or ignored the opportunities he has had of over and over again introducing into his lines the Ouzel-cock.

Tennyson alone in poetry has bestowed on the blackbird the approbation which it is so competent to elicit in payment of its gratuitous minstrelsy for the delight of every one who cares to listen.

## THE FIELDFARE.

"Ye who love the haunts of Nature,
Love the sunshine of the meadow,
Love the shadow of the forest,
Love the wind among the branches,
And the rain-shower and the snow-storm,
And the rushing of great rivers
Through their palisades of pine-trees,
And the thunder in the mountains,
Whose innumerable echoes
Flap like eagles in their eyries."

*Longfellow.*

YES, indeed, ye who love Nature's paths better than the scandalous-gossip-producing chimney-corner—and who does not love the lanes of the country better than the drawing-room, the hedge-bottom better than the grate?—cannot fail to have heard in the winter months the harsh note of the Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*).

Wordsworth concedes to this bird one short allusion—

"The fieldfare's pensive flock."

The "Wachholder-drossel" of the Germans has but rarely made its way into poetical lines, it has not been "pushed" by the "Muse of fire." Knowing that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" the poets have religiously abstained from having anything to do

with a creature so little worthy of their patronage! In his capital book, "The Poets' Birds," Mr. Phil Robinson points to the circumstance that, as a matter of fact, the poets have not been satisfied with their repertory of fowls. "Sometimes," he says, "they (the poets) try to compass variety by using different names for the same bird, for we find them singing mysteriously (to modern ears) of 'gleads,' 'puttocks,' 'ernes,' 'tiercels,' and so forth, when they had used the more familiar names sufficiently often." When one thinks of the wonderful havoc the poets—Wordsworth too—could have made with such names as "Fieldfare," "Feldfare," "Felt," "Felt-fare," "Blue-back," "Blue-tail," and "Blue-felt," one cannot help being sorry that the history of the fieldfare has not been better known.

Why Wordsworth wrote "*pensive* flock" (dejected flock) I cannot imagine; the fieldfare seems extremely wary about shunning the company of man.

> "Fieldfare flocks
> From distant lands alight, and chirping, fly
> From hedge to hedge, avoiding man's approach,"

says Graham in his "Birds of Scotland." This, I am afraid, is a true pourtrayal of the bird's chief characteristics from the poets' point of view.

The late Mr. Alfred Newton, in his fourth edition of Yarrell's "British Birds," says: "It (the fieldfare) is generally seen in large flocks, which if the weather continues open and mild, spread over the fields, and

especially pasture-lands, in search of worms, slugs, and the larvæ of insects; but on the occurrence of snow or frost, the birds take to the hedges, and feed on haws and various berries, or, failing them, even on turnips. At this time they are shy and difficult to approach; the whole flock, taking wing and keeping together, settle by scores on some distant tree, whence, if again disturbed, they wheel off in a body as before." The bird has always appeared to me to be extremely wide awake.

John Burroughs, the American essayist, speaks of Wordsworth as "a kind of cuckoo, a solitary voice." This is indeed a grotesque, but excellent similitude. Was the great mind

> "Whose favourite school
> Hath been the fields, the roads, and rural lanes,"

sometimes lonely in its austere solitude? Did Wordsworth imagine, as Mr. Hamerton does, that it would be pleasanter to be one of the gregarious birds—a member of some "pensive flock"—than one of the solitaries like himself? Did he sicken occasionally of his own reclusiveness? We should often find ourselves doubtful on this question if we did not remember that the matured mind has said—

> "And O ye fountains, meadows, hills, and groves,
> Think not of any severing of our loves!
> Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
> I only have relinquished one delight

To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born day
Is lovely yet;
The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

## THE STONECHAT.

THE Stonechat *(Pratincola rubicola)* is a bird which Wordsworth was acquainted with in his youth, for twice —once in "An Evening Walk," and once in some lines left upon a seat in a yew-tree, which stands near the Lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the shore, commanding a beautiful prospect—do we find mention of this bird.

The first time he introduces the stonechat into his poetry he directs our attention to the bird's activity. The stonechat is *never* still, unless either sleeping or incubating, and its song—short but sweet, interspersed occasionally with the scolding note, "h-weet, jur, jur," uttered by the male as he darts from spray to spray on some furze-covered moor—may be heard from early spring until the latter part of June.

Wordsworth exactly delineates the stonechat's unwearying actions when he says—

> "Where scarce the foxglove peeps, or thistle's beard,
> And restless stonechat, all day long, is heard."

The second time he speaks of the bird, Wordsworth remarks on its sly inquisitiveness. Thus—

> "And here he loved to sit,
> His only visitants a straggling sheep,
> The stonechat, or the glancing sandpiper."

The coupling of the stonechat's name with that of the sandpiper furnishes us with a happy representation of the poet's keen powers of observation. We all know the sandpiper will settle by the water's brink, run round the pond, feed, and disappear. So will the stonechat quickly alight, flit before us for a moment or two, and then suddenly leave us.

The reason why the Poet of Rydal Mount dismisses this bird so early from his verse, I know not. Perhaps while he was still young the stonechat performed one of those strangely erratic migrations which are its well-known characteristic. We all know how this bird will for a few seasons frequent one place, and then suddenly abandon it for another. If I am correct in my conjecture we have another proof here that the candle (which Lamb seems to consider the only muse) was not an absolutely indispensable essential of inspiration to Wordsworth!

## THE REDBREAST.

(*Erithacus rubecula.*)

If the reader has enjoyed—and if he has not, he has a pleasure in store—Mr. Barker's collection of "Original Essays, as written by our Little Ones at School," he will remember an essay on the Robin. The youthful scribe, in his interesting treatise, tells us that the first time he ever saw a robin he trembled. The feelings experienced by this child were not exceptional. In my own childhood—I am painfully aware that my feelings were totally adverse to those generally expressed—I looked upon the redbreast with admiration, certainly, but with admiration tinctured with awe. I loved the bird something after the manner in which a schoolboy loves his master. The chief ingredients of my childish affection to this bird were wonder and dread, flavoured largely with an unreasonable semi-dislike. I looked upon the robin somewhat as a kitten looks upon a pet canary; *instinct* (carnal faults are generally called *instincts!*) said "kill," but the old-time and loveable myth had happily woven a halo of sanctity around the redbreast, which

unceasingly warned me to "beware"! I, like everybody else, imagined that if I destroyed a robin death by lightning, a broken leg, or some other calamity would be my lot. I was not at variance with the world in this belief at least. Our young minds are filled with folklore—with grannified folklore! While yet young we have heard about the robin being the bird of Thor, the lightning god, and we have a vague notion—which notion, by-the-by, is a fragment of that primitive stage of philosophizing in which the lightning is explained as a red bird, dropping from its beak a worm which cleaveth the rocks—has something in common with the dread electric flashes, which in times of atmospheric disturbance fill us all with terror. We are superstitious in our young days, and having had read to us the imperishable ballad of "The Babes in the Wood" we look upon the ruddy-breasted sexton with a peculiar and unexplainable reverence. In our simplicity we trustfully believe that the robin would bury us as he buried the "pretty pair" with leaves. Have we a right to doubt the robin's fidelity? How can we doubt when we are encouraged in our belief by the high priests of Nature?

So Wordsworth, when he comes across an uninjured statue of a child, thrown a considerable distance from the ruined chapel at Fort Fuentes, by an explosion, strengthens our faith when he conjectures that haply

> "Some bird (like our own honoured redbreast) may strew
> The desolate slumberer with moss and with leaves."

Thanks partly to the ballad and partly to a lucky partial migration, this bird, the pious robin, has become a general favourite. The migration I refer to is the singular one we read about in a book dated 1641. It tells us that when, on October 16, 1637, the Puritan, Dr. John Bastwick, landed as a prisoner at the Scilly Islands, he was welcomed with the melody of many thousands of redbreasts (none of which, the narrative affirms, were ever seen in those islands before or since) newly arrived at the castle the evening before.

The poets have sanctified the robin and folklore has protected it.

Let me recall to your memories two deeds of piety which have helped to make the robin sacred. The Welsh believe that the redbreast bears drops of water in his bill to assuage the sufferings of sinners in torment, but that, flying too near the flames, his breast is scorched and he gains the name of "Bron-rhuddyn" (*i.e.* breast-scorched). He feels the winter's cold more than other birds as he returns from the land of fire, and therefore comes shivering to man for protection. In Brittany the red hue of the robin's breast is accounted for by a beautiful belief which reminds us of Julius Mosen's verses, which have been so excellently translated by Longfellow, thus :—

"On the cross the dying Saviour
Heavenward lifts his eyelids calm,
Feels, but scarcely feels, a trembling
In his pierced and bleeding palm.

"And, by all the world forsaken,
Sees He how with zealous care
At the ruthless nail of iron
A little bird is striving there.

"Stained with blood and never tiring,
With its beak it does not cease,
From the cross 'twould free the Saviour,
Its Creator's Son release.

"And the Saviour speaks in mildness;
'Blest be thou of all the good!
Bear, as token of this moment,
Marks of blood and holy rood!'

"And that bird is called the crossbill;
Covered all with blood so clear,
In the groves of pine it singeth
Songs, like legends, strange to hear."

The Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*), as the name implies, has ever since this pious deed flown about with its mandibles crossed, and the male still wears a mantle of brilliant carmine-red.

While the crossbill was vainly striving to free the Saviour, the robin, so legends tell us, dyed its breast by taking a thorn from the crown which the Saviour wore on the cross. Such are the pious acts of the redbreast—myths which are drilled into every young English mind, legends which to doubt in childhood is a sin. How can we help wondering why Wordsworth has not made more of the bird? Certainly he has assisted to sanctify the robin, and I will say he has done as much to endear the bird to us as any poet has; yet with legends so

exquisite to build upon we naturally expect a grand structure.

We come in contact with the finest reference to this bird Wordsworth wrote in a poem, suggested in a Westmorland cottage. I give the whole poem.

"Driven in by Autumn's sharpening air,
From half-stripped woods and pastures bare,
Brisk robin seeks a kindlier home:
Not like a beggar is he come,
But enters as a looked-for guest;
Confiding in his ruddy breast,
As if it were a natural shield
Charged with a blazon on the field,
Due to that good and pious deed
Of which we in the ballad read.
But pensive fancies putting by,
And wild-wood sorrows, speedily
He plays the expert ventriloquist;
And, caught by glimpses, now—now missed,
Puzzles the listener with a doubt
If this soft voice he throws about
Comes from within doors or without!
Was ever such a sweet confusion
Sustained by delicate illusion?
He's at your elbow—to your feeling
The notes are from the floor or ceiling;
And there's a riddle to be guessed,
'Till you have marked his heaving breast,
Where tiny sinking and faint swell
Betray the elf that loves to dwell
In robin's bosom, as a chosen cell.

"Heart-pleased we smile upon the bird,
If seen, and, with like pleasure stirred,

Commend him, when he's only heard.
But small and fugitive *our* gain
Compared with *his* who long hath lain,
With languid limbs and patient head,
Reposing on a lone sick-bed;
Where now he daily hears a strain
What cheats him of too busy cares,
Eases his pain, and helps his prayers,
And who but this dear bird beguiled
The fever of that pale-faced child?
Now cooling, with his passing wing,
Her forehead, like a breeze of spring;
Recalling now, with descant soft
Shed round her pillow from aloft,
Sweet thoughts of angels hovering nigh,
And the invisible sympathy
Of 'Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and John,
Blessing the bed she lies upon;' *
And sometimes, just as listening ends
In slumber, with the cadence blends
A dream of that low-warbled hymn
Which old-folk, fondly pleased to trim
Lamps of faith—now burning dim,
Say that the cherubs carved in stone,
When clouds gave way at dead of night,
And the moon filled the church with light,
Used to sing in heavenly tone;
Above and round the sacred places
They guard, with winged baby-faces.

"Thrice-happy creature! in all lands
Nurtured by hospitable hands:

---

* This child's prayer—"Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, bless the bed *that I lie on*"—is still in general use through the northern countries.

Free entrance to this cot has he,
Entrance and exit both yet free;
And, when the keen unruffled weather
That thus brings man and bird together,
Shall with its pleasantries be past,
The casement closed and door made fast
To keep at bay the howling blast,
He needs not fear the season's rage,
For the whole house is robin's cage.
Whether the bird flit here or there,
O'er table *lilt*, or perch on chair,
Though some may frown, and make a stir
To scare him as a trespasser,
And he belike will flinch and start,
Good friends he has to take his part;
One chiefly, who with voice and look
Pleads for him from the chimney nook,
Where sits the dame, and wears away
Her long and vacant holiday;
With images about her heart,
Reflected, from the years gone by,
On human nature's second infancy."

These are indeed beautiful lines. How universally loved the robin is! The Rev. M. G. Watkins, M.A., in his handsome book, illustrated by Giacomelli,—"Bird Life"—exactly corroborates this when he says, "The robin is a curious instance of a bird with no very amiable temper becoming a general favourite. This arises partly from the welcome patch of colour on its breast, but still more from its habit of drawing near man's habitations in winter, and its trustfulness when fed by him."

Running almost parallel in merit to the poem I have quoted comes his "The Robin and Butterfly."

"Art thou the bird whom man loves best,
The pious bird with the scarlet breast,
Our little English robin;
The bird that comes about our doors
When autumn winds are sobbing?
Art thou the Peter of Norway boors?
Their Thomas in Finland,
And Russia far inland?
The bird, who by some name or other
All men who know thee call their brother,
The darling of children and men?
Could father Adam open his eyes *
And see this sight beneath the skies,
He'd wish to close them again.

"If the butterfly knew but his friend,
Hither his flight he would bend;
And find his way to me
Under the branches of the tree:
In and out, he darts about;
Can this be the bird, to man so good,
That, after their bewildering,
Did cover with leaves the little children,
So painfully in the wood?

"What ailed thee, Robin, that thou could'st pursue
A beautiful creature,
That is gentle by nature?

---

* Note Milton's "Paradise Lost," book xi., where Adam points out to Eve the ominous sign of the bird of Jove driving before him two birds of gayest plume.

Beneath the summer sky
From flower to flower let him fly;
'Tis all that he wishes to do.
The cheerer thou of our indoor sadness,
He is the friend of our summer gladness;
What hinders, then, that ye should be
Play-mates in the sunny weather,
And fly about in the air together!
His beautiful wings in crimson are drest,
A crimson as bright as thine own:
If thou would'st be happy in thy nest,
O pious bird! whom man loves best,
Love him, or leave him alone!"

In these lines Wordsworth has given us a poetical glimpse of the robin's character. It is no mistake to say that man loves the redbreast dearer than any other bird. Why? We can hardly explain. It is undoubtedly the most sociable bird, yet its very friendliness often leads to impudence. Again it is deplorably pugnacious, and its migrations are committed as secretly as a robbery. What a godsend the patch of red has been to the robin! How differently does it fare at the hands of man than the hedge sparrow! But the robin is the favourite, and I, like Wordsworth—

"Guess that, welcome to your lonely hearth,
The redbreast feeds in winter from your hand."

Wordsworth has paid deserved tribute to the redbreast's autumnal song; he speaks once of—

"Snatches of music taken up and dropt
Like those self-solacing, those under notes

Thrilled by the redbreast, when autumnal leaves
Are then upon the bough."

Again in his sonnet, "The Trossachs," he says :—

"Thrice happy guest,
If from a golden perch of aspen spray
(October's workmanship to rival May)
The pensive warbler of the ruddy breast
This mortal sweeten by a heaven-taught lay,
Lulling the year, with all its cares, to rest."

In some verses written at a short distance from Rydal Mount and carried by his little boy to the poet's sister, we find another pleasing reference to the song of the robin :—

"It is the first mild day of March :
Each minute sweeter than before,
The redbreast sings from the tall larch
That stands beside our door."

Now the robin is, perhaps, to some degree an exceptional songster; White of Selborne says that redbreasts "sing all through the spring, summer, and autumn. The reason that they are called autumn songsters is, because in the two first seasons their voices are drowned and lost in the general chorus; in the latter their song becomes distinguishable"—his voice is heard in winter time, and he is heard at his very best in the autumn. But would you call—

"The faint and hesitating trill,"

that the lovely "redbreast" pays to the "winter chill" a happy song? Has it the wonderful joy in it that the lark's has? Scarcely; there is something weird about the notes.

Wordsworth has completely disregarded the enchanting marital relations which are supposed to exist between the robin and the wren. Once indeed, in the "Excursion," do we find the two birds mentioned in one line:—

> "From behind the roof
> Rose the slim ash and massy sycamore,
> Bending their diverse foliage with the green
> Of ivy, flourishing and thick, that clasped
> The huge round chimneys, harbour of delight
> For wren and redbreast, where they sit and sing
> Their slender ditties when the trees are bare."

But here there is no direct allusion to the still prevalent belief that—

> "The robin redbreast and the wren
> Are God Almighty's cock and hen."

We must not forget Wordsworth's Sonnet:—

> "Wild redbreast! had'st thou at Jemima's lips
> Pecked, as at mine, thus boldly, Love might say,
> A half-blown rose had tempted thee to sip
> Its glistening dews; but hallowed is the clay
> Which the Muse warms; and I, whose head is grey,
> Am not unworthy of thy fellowship;
> Nor could I let one thought—one motion slip
> That might thy sylvan confidence betray.

For are we not all His, without whose care
Vouchsafed, no sparrow falleth to the ground?
Who gives his angels wings to speed through air,
And rolls the planets through the blue profound;
Then peck or perch, fond flutterer! nor forbear
To trust a poet in still musings bound."

Mr. Ruskin, our great and eloquent authority on art and æsthetics, in his well-known essay on the Robin, never mentions the delightful contrast between the bird's ruddy breast and the snow. He does not even say as much as Wordsworth does—

"Here, in safe covert, on the shallow snow,
And, sometimes, on a speck of visible earth,
The redbreast near me hopped."

Having carefully read Wordsworth's references to this bird is the reader perfectly satisfied? Does he not still thirst? Does he not feel that more—much more—might have been made of this interesting bird by the great Nature poet?

## THE NIGHTINGALE.

"The man that hath no music in himself
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treason, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted."

*Shakespeare.*

It is often doubted whether the Nightingale (*Daulias luscinia*) has ever been heard in Westmorland. The anonymous record of this bird being heard in the summer of 1808, near Carlisle, must be looked upon, says Mr. Newton, with suspicion, and he likewise encourages the ornithologist to mistrust the Westmorland occurrence.*

The nightingale's distribution over England and Wales, which, thanks to the Protection Act, is slowly increasing its bounds, is one of those peculiarities of Nature which man's understanding is not sufficient to

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* If the reader will cast his eye on the rough map I have sketched on the opposite page he will at one glance see what would take a page to particularize.

DISTRIBUTION OF NIGHTINGALE
OVER
ENGLAND AND WALES
SCOTLAND
(Questioned whether ever been heard)
CUMBERLAND
WESTMORELAND
ISLE OF MAN
YORKSHIRE
DERBY
STAFFORD
SHROPSHIRE
GLOSTER
BRECKNOCK
CARMARTHEN
SOMERSET
DEVON
ISLE OF WIGHT
Occurs yearly with great regularity, being in some places numerous

unravel, and we are only able to conjecture and speak of the unknown, if not as a phenomenal characteristic, as something in keeping with the extraordinary. We of course know that other animals (and plants also for that matter) have a definite range which they rarely overstep; but when we come across a bird like the nightingale, which keeps so mysteriously within certain limits, we have to confess that our powers of explanation are at fault. In some districts nightingales are to be heard filling the air with glorious melody in every hedge-row, while in other places, to all appearance quite as well suited to their habits, not one has ever been observed. "And, stranger still," remarks Chambers, "this marked difference between abundance and total absence of nightingales exists between places only a few miles apart. It might be supposed that the warmer districts of the kingdom would be most congenial to their habits. Yet they are not found in Cornwall, nor in the south of Devonshire, where, in favourable seasons, the orange ripens in the open air." Nightingales are seldom heard in England north of York, but they are, curious enough, plentiful in Denmark.

Sir John Sinclair, the patriotic Scotchman, once thought to establish the nightingale in his own country. He attempted on a scale large enough to exhibit very palpable results, had the desired end been practicable. A London dealer was commissioned to purchase as many nightingales' eggs as he could get at the liberal price of one shilling each; these, packed in wool, were

sent up to Scotland by mail. Men had previously been engaged to find and take care of all robins' nests, in places where the eggs could be hatched in safety. As regularly as the parcels of eggs arrived from London, the robins' eggs were removed from their nests, and replaced by those of the nightingale, which, in due time were sat upon, hatched, and the young reared by their Scotch foster-parents. The young nightingales, when full fledged, flew about, and were observed for some time afterwards apparently quite at home in the vicinity where they first saw the light, but in September they departed, never more to return. I have previously endeavoured to point out Wordworth's keen powers of observation, and it has been my text in these pages ever to uphold him as a very great, *if not the greatest*, poet of Nature.

It is when the student comes to Wordsworth's notices of the nightingale that he has an opportunity of fully appreciating the poet's singular watchfulness and correct ear. Naturalists as well as poets have repeatedly mistaken the songs of other birds for the "mazy ravening soul of melody" which belongs entirely to the nightingale, and I am not surprised. Wordsworth knows the nightingale's triumphant voice and he does not let his pen bear testimony of the "strain that might arouse the dead," as echoing amongst his home-surrounding hills.

I would not inspire the enthusiast to place any belief in the one record current, true though it may be, that

an Indian roller may stray from home into the heart of Lincolnshire.

The occurrences of the nightingale in the Lake District, if *there ever have been any*, have been both remarkably uncommon and badly noted.

He who would favour the one account need not turn over the pages of the Laureate of the Lakes for verification or support. The bird lover can extract litle comfort, even from Wordsworth's fine passage* in his "Excursion," and I should advise him to remain dubious, if not ignorant, as to the coherence of the reference he will there read, and, moreover, let us remember *quod nescias damnare, summa est temeritas.* The annotation is unsatisfac-

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* The lines I here refer to may be found in Book IV., they are:—

"Has not the soul, the being of your life,
Received a shock of awful consciousness,
In some calm season, when these lofty rocks
At night's approach bring down the unclouded sky,
To rest upon their circumambient walls;
A temple framing of dimensions vast,
And yet not too enormous for the sound
Of human anthems,—choral song, or burst
Sublime of instrumental harmony,
To glorify the Eternal! What if these
Did never break the stillness that prevails
*Here, if the solemn nightingale be mute*
And the soft woodlark here did never chant
Her vespers, Nature fails not to provide
Impulse and utterance."

tory and throws amidst ornithologists a bone over which they are quite entitled to hold a controversial snarl. But let us not be too sanguine. I have extremely little faith in the argument that Wordsworth wanted to establish by these lines the not altogether improbable theory of an accidental incident of a birds' invasion. Those who, like myself, object to this being considered as authenticating the only record, can find ample material with which to dismiss, if not defeat, the fervent believer. Wordsworth himself tells his reader that the nightingale has *never* been heard in Westmorland, and in the following lines laments its absence.

"O Nightingale! who ever heard thy song
Might here be moved, till fancy grows so strong
That listening sense is pardonably cheated
Where wood or stream by thee was *never* greeted.
Surely, from fairest spots of favoured lands,
Were not some gifts withheld by zealous hands,
This hour of deepening darkness here would be
As a fresh morning of new harmony;
And lays as prompt would hail the dawn of night;
A *dawn* she has both beautiful and bright,
When the East kindles with the full moon's light.

"Wanderer by spring with gradual progress led,
For sway profoundly felt as widely spread;
To king, to peasant, to rough sailor, dear,
And to the soldier's trumpet-wearied ear;
How welcome wouldst thou be to this green vale
Fairer than Tempe! Yet, sweet nightingale!
From the warm breeze that bears thee on alight
At will, and stay thy migratory flight;

Build at thy choice, or sing, by pool or fount;
Who shall complain, or call thee to account?
The wisest, happiest, of our kind are they
That ever walk content with Nature's way,
God's goodness measuring bounty as it may;
For whom the gravest thought of what they miss,
Chastening the fulness of a present bliss,
Is with that wholesome office satisfied,
While unrepining sadness is allied
In thankful bosoms to a modest pride."

Here Wordsworth, who was continually to be found wandering about in the open air, distinctly asserts that the Lake district has not been visited by the nightingale, and these lines, written by the side of Rydal Mere, will probably be sufficient to dispel the last grain of the reader's credulity in the single attestation to be found in Yarrell's "British Birds." Personally I would far more willingly accept Wordsworth's statement as true—the statement of a poet-naturalist, who was always in the fields—than any record from an anonymous pen.

Let it be again remembered that Wordsworth is said to have been no reader of books, and it will be easier to estimate his knowledge of ornithology. He never mentions "the bird forlorn, that singeth with her breast against a thorn" as rendering enchanting notes by the side of one of his well-known lakes, not because he has *read* that it has never been known in Westmorland to sing its midnight carols, but because he cannot hear the "plaintive anthem" amongst the choir of "harmonized society" which exists round Rydal Mount.

Wordsworth, therefore, has not been able to introduce the nightingale into those striking descriptions which he has given to the world of his own country. Each individual reader must judge for himself what power such a voice as the nightingale's would have been in the pen of Wordsworth. How magnificently he could have ushered this lonely bird into his grand "Excursion"! how elegantly his Duddon sonnets could carry the name, the habits, the discussion-provoking notes of Philomela! But being a true painter, not given to exaggerations like Dean Swift, he limns us but a beautiful picture which we ourselves may examine.

Wordsworth also knew a little about the natural history of the nightingale, and now that we have seen that the bird was completely debarred from his Lake portrayals we may consider what he knew.

Already we have seen that he was not ignorant that the nightingale is a visitor of these isles, and that its flight ended not far distant and to the south of his own well-loved county.

Now one of the chief stumbling-blocks over which our poets have fallen has been the nightingale's mood of singing; this has always more or less puzzled them. To think of a nightingale standing upon a lowly twig and discoursing his perfect music to his incubating partner appears to the poets (Shelley particularly!) as something out of keeping with the bird's rich voice! The beauty of this natural fact is disregarded, they must have something a little more romantic! How are

they to fancy a nightingale's song as issuing from the side of a partner who sits amidst the tangle of an undergrowth? Pshaw! it is absurd, and cannot be conceived. Keats must elevate his bird, and so he tells us it is "upperched high"; Leyden's bird must be "on high"; Moore places his "on the high trees"; Campbell "in an apple-tree"; Cowper, not to be beaten, goes, as Sala has it, the "entire animal" and lets it claim "the topmost bough"; Broome having no tree left sufficiently high for his fancy makes "Philomel, upborne on wing, through air the mournful story sing," and Shelley, not to be defeated, writes vaguely:—

> "And soon her strain
> The nightingale began, now loud,
> *Climbing in circles the windless sky,*
> Now dying music; suddenly
> 'Tis scattered in a thousand notes,
> And now to the husband ear it *floats*," etc., etc.

And backs these lines, which may be accepted as either meaning the voice or the bird, with—

> "Lifts on high
> The wings of the weak melody,
> Till some new strain of feeling bear
> The song, and all the woods are mute;
> When *there is heard through the dim air,*
> *The rush of wings and rising there*
> *Like many* lake-surrounding flute,
> Sounds overflow the listener's brain."

Wordsworth cannot be accused of such unaccount-

able word-painting, for in a sonnet written in 1820 he says "the night-bird" (the nightingale evidently he here implies, for he speaks in a later poem of "Philomel of night") "sang from shady bough." These words were written in May. In the next month of the same year he sketches the spot likely to be tenanted by our grandest night singer thus:—

> "Fame tells of groves—from England far away,*
> Groves that inspire the nightingale to trill
> And modulate, with subtle reach of skill
> Elsewhere unmatched, her ever-varying lay;
> Such bold report I venture to gainsay:
> For I have heard the choir of Richmond Hill
> Chanting, with indefatigable bill,
> Strains, that recalled to mind a distant day;
> When, haply under shade of that same wood,
> And scarcely conscious of the dashing oars
> Plied steadily between those willowy shores,
> The sweet-sound poet of 'The Seasons' stood
> Listening, and listening long, in rapturous mood,
> Ye heavenly birds! to your progenitors."

The poet may be here pulled up for making the *female* bird the chantress, but how often do we find the singing nightingale referred to as "her," "she," "chantress," "Philomela," "Queen"! This, though a mistake in a sense, is not the result of poetical ignorance. We speak of the neutral ship as "she," and the poets, permitted by special license, call the masculine

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* Wallachia is the country alluded to.

bird "she," her," or "Philomela" indiscriminately and indifferently. In this respect the poets have followed one another like sheep, and the one is not the less or more deserving of blame than the other. We must compare several to see the particular shortcomings of any distinct one, and we can only do this by selecting a batch of prominent quotations :*—

"With the nightingale will I take part,
That blessed byrd, that spendes *her* time of sleepe
In songs and plaintive pleas, the more t'augment
The memorie of his misdeede that bred *her* woe."

*Spenser.*

"Everything did banish moan,
Save the nightingale alone;
*She*, poor bird, as all forlorn,
Lean'd her breast uptill a thorn,
And there sung the dolefull'st ditty
That to hear it was great pity."

*Shakespeare.*

"Sweet bird, that shun'st the noise of folly,
Most musical, most melancholy,
Thee, *chauntress*, oft the woods among
I woo, to hear thy evening-song."

"Less Philom*el* will deign a song,
In *her* sweetest, saddest plight,
Smoothing the rugged brow of night."

"The love-lorn nightingale,
Nightly to thee *her* sad song mourneth well."

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* Most of these quotations may be found in Mr. Robinson's charming book.

"Till even; nor then the solemn nightingale ceased warbling, but all night tuned *her* soft lays . . . . Then silent night, with this her solemn bird."

"For beast and bird,
They to their grassy couch, these to their nests,
Were slunk, all but the wakeful nightingale;
*She* all night long *her* amorous descant sung;
Silence was pleased."

"The attic bird trills *her* thick warbled notes the summer long."

"As the wakeful bird
Sings darkling, and in shadiest cover hid,
Tunes *her* nocturnal note."

*Milton.*

"The nightingale, *she* pours
*Her* solitary lays,
Nor asks a witness to her song,
Nor thirsts for human praise."

*Cowper.*

"Hark! the nightingale,
*Queen* of all music, to *her* listening breast,
Speaks, and the woods are still."

*Cornwall.*

"The nightingale, as soon as April bringeth—
Unto her rested sense a perfect waking,
While late bare earth, proud of her clothing, springeth,
Sings out *her* woes, a thorn her song-book making,
And mournfully bewailing—
Her throat in tunes expresseth;
While grief her heart oppresseth—
For Tereus o'er *her* chaste will prevailing."

*Phil. Sidney.*

"No nightingale *her* love-lorn tune
More sweetly warbles to the moon."

*Scott.*

"The nightingale
*Her* solo anthem sung."

*Hurdis.*

"There tuned sweet Philomel *her* sprightly lay,
Both to the rising and the falling day."

*Brown.*

"The *queen* of all the quire."

*Dryden.*

"All was still;
And now the nightingale her song poured forth
In such a torrent of heartfelt delight,
So fast it flowed, *her* tongue so voluble
As if *she* thought *her* hearers would be gone
Ere half was told."

*Rogers.*

"The nightingale's pure song I could not try;
And when the thrush would mock *her* song, she paused
And sang another song no bird could do;
*She* sang when all were done, and beat them all."

*Clare.*

"Through the sleek passage of *her* open throat
A clear unwrinkled song; then doth *she* point it by short diminutions,
That from so small a channel should be raised
The torrent of a voice, whose melody
Could melt into such sweet variety."

*Crashaw.*

"Sad Philomel, in bowery shades unseen,
To vernal airs attunes *her* varied strains.
When the nightingale to rest removes
The thrush may chant to the forsaken groves;

But charm'd to silence, listen while she sings,
And all th' aerial audience clap their wings."

*Pope.*

"The seasons Philomel obey,
Where'er they hear *her* sing;
The winter flies away,
And *she* recalls the spring."

*Rowe.*

"Whose trembling notes steal out between
The clustered leaves, herself unseen,
The nightingale now bends her flight
From the high trees, where all the night
*She* sung so sweet."

*Moore.*

"Aske me no more where doth hast
The nightingale when May is past,
For in your sweet dividing throat
*She* winters and keeps warm *her* note."

*Carew.*

"Look, as a nightingale, whose callow young
Some boy hath markt, and now half-nak'd hath taken,
Which long *she* closely kept, and foster'd long,
But all in vain; *she* now, poore bird, forsaken,
Flies up and down, but griefe no place can shaken;
All day and night *her* losse she fresh doth rue,
And when she ends *her* plaints, then soon begins anew."

*Phineas Fletcher.*

I cannot see that this is the great fault the poets' critics make it out to be. The origin of this change of sex—for really the male bird only is the songster—is to be found, undoubtedly, in the old fable which tells us of the transformation of Philomela, daughter of

Pandion, King of Athens, into a nightingale, when Progne, her sister, was changed into a swallow. It is at most a mere transposition of sexual names; no one will, from the quotations he has read, aver that the poets have been labouring under an absonant sophistry.

With Somerville the case is different when he says—

> "So plains the restless Philomel, *her* nest
> And callow young, the tender growing hope
> Of future harmony, and frail return
> For all her cares, to barb'rous churls a prey;
> Darkling she sings, the woods repeat *her* moan."

Here he clearly exhibits ignorance, for he makes the female nightingale bemoan the pilfering of her nest. Thomson too credits Philomela with the voice that is alone the male's when he writes—

> "But let me chief the nightingale lament,
> *Her* ruined case, too delicately framed
> To brook the harsh confinement of a cage,
> Oft when returning with *her* loaded bill,
> The astonished mother finds a vacant nest,
> By the hard hand of unrelenting clowns
> Robbed; to the ground the vain provision falls,
> *Her* pinions ruffle, and, low drooping, scarce
> Can bear the mourner to *her* poplar shade,
> Where, all abandoned to despair, *she* sings
> *Her* sorrows through the night; and on the bough
> Sole-sitting, still at every dying fall,
> Takes up again *her* lamentable strain
> Of winding woe, till wide around the woods
> Sigh to *her* song, and with *her* wail resound."

Somerville and Thomson seem to have copied Virgil here, for Virgil, when portraying the grief of Orpheus, after the loss of Eurydice, writes—

> "So Philomela, 'mid the poplar shade,
> Bemoans her captive brood; the cruel hind,
> Saw them unplumed, and took them; but all night
> Grieves she, and, sitting on a bough, runs o'er
> Her wretched tale, and fills the woods with woe."

The more Shelley wrote about Philomel the more he exhibited a surprising apathy to natural reality. He undeniably thought the female the songstress, and no excuse—when we remember that his earlier days were spent at Horsham in the south—will cover the nakedness of his ludicrous nescience. Thus does he speak:—

> "The lorn nightingale
> Mourns not *her* mate with such melodious pain"

> "The accustomed nightingale still broods
> On her accustomed bough,
> But *she* is mute, for *her* false mate
> Has fled and left *her* desolate."

> "Daylight on its last purple cloud
> Was lingering grey, and soon *her* strain
> The nightingale began."

> "The nightingale
> Was pausing in her heaven-taught tale;
> 'Now drain the cup,' said Lionel,
> 'Which the poet-bird has crowned so well
> With the wine of *her* bright and liquid song!'"

"The lone nightingale
Has answered me with *her* most soothing song
Out of *her* ivy bower, when I sat pale
With grief and sighed beneath."

"As a vale is watered by a flood
Of the circumfluous waters, every sphere
And every flower, and beam, and cloud, and wave,
And every wind of the mute atmosphere;
Or as the moonlight fills the open sky,
Struggling with darkness; as a tube rose
Peoples some Indian dell with scents which lie
Like clouds above the flower from which they rose,
The singing of that happy nightingale
In this sweet forest, from the golden close
Of evening till the star of dawn may fail,
Was interfused upon the silentness.
The folded roses and the violets pale
Heard *her* within their slumbers, the abyss
Of heaven with all its planets, the dull ear
Of the night-cradled earth, the loneliness;
And every beast stretched in its rugged cave,
And every bird lulled on its mossy bough,
And every silver moth fresh from the grave
Which is its cradle—even from below
Aspiring like one who loves too fair, too far,
To be consumed within the purest glow
Of one serene and unapproachable star,
As if it were a lamp of earthly light,
Unconscious, as some human lovers are,
Itself how low, how high beyond all height
The heaven where, it would perish; and every form
That worshipped in the temple of the night
Was awed into delight, and by the charm
Girt as with an interminable zone,
Whilst that sweet bird, whose music was a storm

Of sound, shook forth the dull oblivion
Out of their dreams, harmony became love
In every soul but one."

Mr. Hamerton says, "I wish all song-birds were rank poison—there might be some chance of preserving them then. What right-minded person can eat larks and thrushes without compunction? One of the most odious and monstrous sights to be met with in Europe is a fat and vulgar French bag-man devouring a dish of skylarks. Look at him as he eats, not inaudibly, and think of Shelley's verse! Only imagine those abominable old Romans who swallowed platefuls of nightingales' tongues! How perfectly *bête* was their notion of luxury! how stupid to fancy that because the nightingale sang so sweetly her tongue must be particularly succulent! It would be as reasonable to make a dish of old fiddle-strings."

What force! and in the right cause too. Carlyle in his estimation of man was not far wrong. The old Romans did not differ greatly from the English of the present day. There is this contrast between us. The Romans killed their nightingales immediately to procure the chief instrument of song and devour it! We procure the bird itself, kill it, and pitch its little corpse away! The antithesis is not great, one cannot say we have in this respect civilised rapidly. I sympathise rather with the pronounced uneducated ancient than with the pretentiously refined modern! Tennyson is right when he tells us—

"We are ancients of the earth
And in the morning of the times."

We are a very ancient people, with ancient ways belonging to us, ways which we have an eccentric antipathy to cast off; but yet a people, as Burke says, who are still, as it were, but in the gristle, and not yet hardened into the bone of manhood. Nightingales in the early summer months arrive here in immense numbers, but how do we treat them? Directly they arrive they are trapped and caged—caged without thought; for the greatest result we have gained, even by scrupulously particular feeding and judicious management, is a one hundred and fourteen days' song! a piteous warble, a sordid ghost of the wild and real, half-joyous, half-melancholy strain. It is galling to think that in the year 1867, three London bird-catchers, between April 13th and May 2nd, caught no less than *two hundred and twenty-five* nightingales, all, except some half-dozen, cock birds. We would willingly doubt this irritating statement did it not come from the pen of the well-known naturalist Mr. Harting, who assures us that such is the case. Only one specimen of humanity is here alluded to, a notorious robber, one who in 1866 stole from the groves surrounding London upwards of *two hundred and two* male birds! Is this man obtaining an honest living?

I am thankful to think that our cruelty—and it is rank cruelty to imprison a nightingale!—arises, like the Roman's gluttonous actions, from love alone; this is

certainly a redeeming feature. What infinite wrong we do while we still cling to the horns of our secreting altar, love!

Though our love—admiration call it, if you will—of this bird leads us into ignorant unkindness, yet our adoration of its song is pure. The poets, with the exception of Wordsworth, who prefers the coo of the dove, and a few others, make a favourite of the bird, and they admire its song in the same ardent manner as honest Isaak Walton, the angler, did when he said, "The nightingale breathes such sweet loud music out of her little instrumental throat, that it might make mankind to think miracles are not ceased. He that at night, when the very labourer sleeps securely, should hear, as I have very often, the clear airs, the sweet descants, the natural rising and falling, the doubling and redoubling of her voice, might well be lifted above earth, and say, Lord, what music hast thou provided for the saints in heaven, when thou affordest bad men such music on earth?"

When Matthew, standing by his daughter's grave in "Two April Mornings," exalts her memory, thus—

> "Nine summers had she scarcely seen,
> The pride of all the vale;
> And then she sang,—she would have been
> A very nightingale,"

we only read a variation of the proverb, "To sing like a nightingale"; had Matthew's daughter lived she would have sung as sweetly as any Shakespearian Katharina.

The poets, with admitted exceptions, have known, alas! dreadfully little about Philomel. He who is fond of natural history, but has not the money to buy, or the time to peruse, the works of Gould, Seebohlm, Yarrell, or Morris, for his ornithological information, must not expect to get a fund of minutely correct intelligence about the nightingale from the pages of the poets. They have written beautifully about the bird, but often without the least consideration. The nightingale has ever been their pet, they have illumined it with well-deserved praise and admiration, but they have done this too bravely, too careless and regardless of facts.

I have already touched upon two misconceptions, three others still remain to be noticed. It is erroneous to say that the nightingale only sings during the nocturnal hours, and it is just as wrong to state that the bird monopolizes the hours of the night. The nightingale sings all day, lending his superb voice to soften, to fill with ecstasy, to insert a strain of pain, to make exquisite, gushing, triumphant, the one voice of bird medley. And in the night-time, if we would but listen, we should hear that the bird is not alone, for the sedge-warbler, grasshopper warbler, woodlark, skylark, thrush, cuckoo, and corn-crake assist to permeate the air with heavenly melody. However it is in the hours when all is closed in sleep that we hear to best advantage the bird's nightly *galan*, when the moon reigns in the heavens. Then it is that Philomel's voice overflows the deluding woods, and comes

to our ears, "transporting," "ebullient," "enrapturing," "as faultless and as musical as angels' strains above."

Wordsworth's knowledge failed him in this respect, and he may be impeached for speaking of the nightingale as

"Philomel of night,"

and again—

"Evening's solemn bird."

He may be accused of suffering this hallucination, yet our grounds for the charge are meagre, in fact too delicate to withstand the *pros* and *cons* of a defensive argument with satisfaction. Our material is stilted and shaky. We are only furnished with the sort of evidence we require before we have a right to accuse the poet by Milton's line—

"All but the wakeful nightingale;"

Cowper's—

"Ten thousand warbles clear the day, but one
The livelong night;"

or Beattie's—

"Nought but the nightingale's song in the grove."

The voice of the nightingale has generated amongst the poets a pretty poetical controversy, and it is said that more epithets have been applied to this bird than to any other object in creation. Cuthbert Bede collected and published in *Notes and Queries* no less than one

hundred and thirteen simple adjectives epithetically bestowed upon the nightingale by British poets; and Chambers, the author of "The Book of Days," in the same periodical, added sixty-five more to the number. But the poetic dispute arises with reference to the character of the bird's song—does it sing of grief or joy? of pain or happiness? of agony or ecstasy? death or life? Does it fill the night air with pæans of triumph, epinicions of victory, or anthems of distressing melancholy? Milton speaks of the nightingale as the

> "Sweet bird that shuns the noise of folly,
> Most musical, most melancholy."

To this, almost indignantly, replies Coleridge:

> "'Most musical, most melancholy bird!'
> A melancholy bird? O idle thought,
> In nature there is nothing melancholy;
> But some night-wandering man, whose heart was pierced
> With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
> Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
> And so, poor wretch, filled all things with himself,
> And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
> Of his own sorrows—he, and such as he,
> First named thy notes a melancholy strain.
>
> "'Tis the merry nightingale,
> That crowds and hurries and precipitates,
> With fast thick warble, his delicious notes,
> As if he were fearful that an April night
> Would be too short for him to utter forth
> His love chant, and disburden his full soul
> Of all its music."

Coleridge must have discussed this point of natural

history with Wordsworth, and the Laureate is of one mind with his companion, for he says—

> "She, who inspires that strain of joyous holy
> Which the sweet bird, misnamed the melancholy,
> Pours forth in shady groves, shall plead for me."

It is fancy which may lead man's imagination into converting sadness out of joy; it is at the bidding of fancy Wordsworth writes that—

> "Ancient lays
> Steeped in dire griefs the voice of Philomel."

The classical fable I have already alluded to may have given an ideal tinge of melancholy to the Daulian minstrel's song, but we have another popular error, which is even now not altogether forgotten, which may be the origin of any intensely sorrowful notes the nightingale may be guilty of discoursing; the hallucination that the bird sings with its breast impaled upon a thorn. Sir Philip Sidney, in an exquisite sonnet, which, in 1604, was set to music by Bateson, thus touches this theory:—

> "The nightingale, as soon as April bringeth
> Into her rested sense a perfect waking,
> While late bare earth, proud of her clothing springeth,
> Sings out her woes, a thorn her song-book making;
> And mournfully bewailing,
> Her throat in tones expresseth,
> While grief her heart oppresseth,
> For Tereus o'er her chaste will prevailing."

Sidney cannot be complimented on first noticing this strange belief in poetry, for I believe Shakespeare

is the earliest mentioner of this myth. He tells us in the *Passionate Pilgrim*—

> "Everything did banish moan,
> Save the nightingale alone;
> She, poor bird, as all forlorn,
> Leaned her breast up till a thorn,
> And then sung the dolefull'st ditty,
> That to hear her it was great pity."

I do not think we shall all agree with Hartley Coleridge, who, when glancing at the controversy regarding the nightingale's song, says; "No doubt the sensations of the bird while singing are pleasurable; but the question is, what is the feeling which its song, considered as a succession of sounds produced by an instrument, is calculated to convey to a human listener? When we speak of a pathetic strain of music, we do not mean that either the fiddle or the fiddler is unhappy, but that the tones or intervals of the air are such as the mind associates with tearful sympathies. At the same time I utterly deny that the voice of Philomel expresses present pain. I could never have imagined that the pretty creature sets its breast against a thorn, and could not have perpetrated the abominable story of Tereus." Nor shall we all sympathize with this poem in which, to further illustrate his opinion, he compares the songs of the nightingale and the lark—

> "'Tis sweet to hear the merry lark
> That bids a blithe good morrow;
> But sweeter to hark, in the twinkling dark,
> To the soothing song of sorrow.

Oh, nightingale! what doth she ail?
  And is she sad or jolly?
For ne'er on earth was sound of mirth
  So like to melancholy.
The merry lark, he soars on high,
  No worldly thought o'ertakes him;
He sings aloud to the clear blue sky,
  And the daylight that awakes him.
As sweet a lay, as loud as gay,
  The nightingale is trilling;
With feeling bliss, no less than his,
  Her little heart is thrilling.
Yet ever and anon a sigh
  Peers through her lavish mirth;
For the lark's bold song is of the sky,
  And hers is of the earth.
By night and day she times her lay,
  To drive away all sorrow:
For bliss, alas! to-night must pass,
  And woe may come to-morrow."

This poem is lively, and the illustration is worthy of the son of the author of "The Ancient Mariner," but yet, while I have listened to the nightingale's song, more than joy has reached my ear—I have heard notes which have filled the air with woe, notes which have made the very heavens mournful with affliction and grief. To find the real characteristics of both joy and trouble in Philomel's song we must go to Tennyson's "In Memoriam" and read—

"Wild bird! whose warble liquid, sweet,
  Rings echo through the budded quicks,
  Oh, tell me where the senses mix;
Oh, tell me where the passions meet,

Whence radiate? Fierce extremes employ
Thy spirit in the lurking leaf,
And in the midmost heart of grief
Thy passion clasps a secret joy."

Or we must turn to his lines in "The Gardener's Daughter"—

"Yet might I tell of weepings, of farewells,—
Of that which comes between more sweet than each,
In whispers, like the whispers of the leaves,
That tremble round a nightingale—in sighs
Which perfect joy, perplexed for utterance,
Stole from her sister sorrow."

Drummond, of Hawthornden, when he wrote his two lines—

"Sweet artless songster, thou my mind doth raise
To airs of spheres, yes, and to angels' lays,"

little thought that he was penning the foundation for one of the most angelic characters to the modulated strains of this bird. It is well that Faber was not too proud to accept another man's notions, or these beautiful lines which we find in his "The Cherwell Water Lily," most likely would never have been written:—

"I heard the raptured nightingale
Tell from yon elmy grove his tale
Of jealousy and love,
In thronging notes that seemed to fall
As faultless and as musical
As angels' strains above.
So sweet, they cast on all things round
A spell of melody profound

They charmed the river in its flowing,
They stayed the night-wind in its blowing,
They lulled the lily to her rest,
Upon the Cherwell's heaving breast."

Wordsworth, too, has noted these two adverse strains in the one most wonderful song, thus:—

"O nightingale! thou surely art
A creature of a fiery heart;
These notes of thine—they pierce and pierce
Tumultuous harmony and fierce!
Thou sing'st as if the god of wine
Had helped thee to a valentine;
A song in mockery and despite
Of shades, and dews, and silent night;
And steady bliss, and all the loves
Now sleeping in these peaceful groves."

I cannot think that the poets are agreed that the nightingale's song is one of melancholy. Nor should I consider this fortunate, had it been a fact. This poetic discussion furnishes the ornithologist with delightful reading. Though the majority of poets hear the "Mournful Philomel"—the "night's solemn bird," yet there are some, whose physical temperaments differ, no doubt, who hear—

"Philomel with melody
Singing our sweet lullaby."

Nay, I believe if we will listen attentively to the Daulian songster's chant we shall hear more joy in it than

sorrow. Charles Kingsley paints us the true picture we would admire, when he says*—"Listen to the charm of birds in any sequestered woodland on a bright forenoon in early summer. As you try to disentangle the medley of sounds, the first, perhaps, which will strike your ear will be the loud, harsh, monotonous, flippant song of the chaffinch, and the metallic clinking of two or three sorts of titmice. But above the tree-tops, rising, hovering, sinking, the woodlark is fluting tender and low. Above the pastures, outside, the skylark sings, as he alone can sing; and close by, from the hollies, sings out the blackbird's tenor—rollicking, audacious, humorous, all but articulate. From the tree above him rises the treble of the thrush, pure as the song of angels; more pure, perhaps, in tone, though neither so varied nor so rich, as the song of the nightingale. And there in the next holly is the nightingale himself; now croaking like a frog, now talking aside to his wife, and now bursting out into that song, or cycle of songs, in which, if any man finds sorrow, he himself surely finds none. . . . In Nature there is nothing melancholy."

Partly the fables of the ancients, and again partly the poet's own idiosyncrasy, have coloured men's belief in the grief supposed to be totally expressed in the clear, sweet melody of the nightingale. When we read all the folklore about this wondrous songster, the legends which pervade literature, we cannot wonder

* Prose Idylls, 1866.

that the poetic ear catches nought but notes of trouble. The myth which tells us of the fate of poor Philomela, who was forced to leave the presence of her sister Progne, and change her gorgeous raiments for the sober reddish-chestnut brown of the nightingale, provides us with a dismal effigy of the fate of a King of Athens. Then Pliny tells us its temper is not sublime and it dies from vexation if conquered in song. To irritate its disposition, it sillily constructs a nest with a thorn placed inconveniently in the middle, and the singing male, in sympathy perhaps, must lean upon a thorn as it sings, and thus bewail its uncomfortable sufferings. The bird assists the robin in English folklore in the kind services of burying the dead—a service though, however kind it may be, not conducive to unmitigated happiness! And the nightingale does not finish its duties to man here. It has to chant in the mouth of Stesichorus to typify the sweetness of his future lyrics, and it has to attend the birth of Moore, and inspire the infant poet with its song, or it woos an inanimate rose. Lastly—no, not lastly, for I believe there are yet numerous legends I have never seen recorded—Dame Fortune's cruel hand changes the bird's day life into one of night. What a pitiful account we read in Val Ste. Veronique.* "Long ago it used to sing like other birds in the daytime; but once, in a warm night of May, one fell asleep on a rapidly-growing vine. The tendrils of

* P. G. Hamerton.

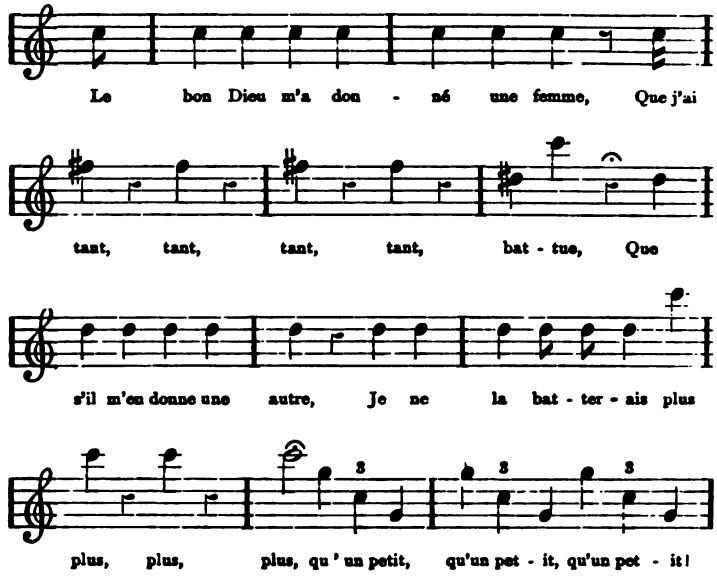
this grew very fast, and twined about its slender legs as it slept, so that when morn broke it could not escape, and its mates came to compassionate its woe. At length it died, and they were so impressed by its sad end that they dared no longer to sleep at night, but watched in fear, and sang to keep each other awake. Even yet they utter the same notes of warning, and what they say is this:—'La vigne pouse—pouse—pouse, vite, vite, vite, vite, vite, vite, vite!' pronouncing 'pouse,' etc., slowly and in soft cadences, 'vite,' higher and higher till it finishes in rapid presto." Ah! poor bird, what wonder if its notes are not always those of intense joviality?

We have to go back more than two hundred years for an attempt to reduce the nightingale's song to letters and words. Marco Betton, a Jesuit, has been eminently successful in pitching a basis for Bechstein, neither a scientific naturalist nor a scholar, but a true sportsman and observer of Nature, to erect his remarkable imitation of the different notes and modulations of the nightingale's champion voice. This may appear uncouth, but it must be acknowledged a striking imitation.

Tiouou, tiouou, tiouou, tiouou,
Shpe tiou lokoua,
Tio, tio, tio, tio,
Kououtio, kououtiou, kouotiou, koutioutio
Tokuo, tskouo, tskouo, tskouo,
Tsii, tsii, tsii, tsii, tsii, tsii, tsii, tsii, tsii, tsii, tsii,
Kouorror, tiou, tksoua, pipithsouis,

Tso, tso, tso, tso, tso, tso, tso, tso, tso, tso, tso, tso, tsirrhading,
Tsi, tsi, si, tosi, si, si, si, si, si, si, si, si,
Tsorre, tsorre, tsorre, tsoryeki ;
Tsuta, tsuta, tsuta, tsuta, tsuta, tsuta, tsuta, tsi,
Dlo, dlo, dlo, dlo, dlo, dlo, dlo, dlo, dlo,
Kouiou, trrrrrrrritzt,
Lu, lu, lu, ly, ly, ly, li, li, li, li.

We are indebted to Chalons, a celebrated Belgian composer, for setting this to music, and though Nodier asserts that there is nothing equal to it in the language of imitation, yet Chambers is of opinion that it is surpassed in expression, compass of voice, and emphasis on the notes, by the following slightly ungallant imitation, sung by the French peasantry :—



Mr. Robinson points out that the nightingale is less disturbed by the presence of an audience than any other bird; how far he is correct I wish not to dispute, but there is still one passage in Wordsworth I would not neglect to mention:—

> "Though martial songs have banished songs of love,
> And nightingales forsake the village grove,
> Scared by the fife and rumbling drum's alarms,
> And the short thunder, and the flash of arms."

This is not the kind of an audience the nightingale appreciates, and those who would hear his song had better advance in a stealthier and gentler manner.

Had Wordsworth lived in an eastern county instead of a western, where the nightingale never courts the blushing rose, then we should have been entitled to grander lines from him, but now we can only

> "Leave to the nightingale her shady wood,"

and deplore his scanty introductions of this bird into his lines in the same spirit as he would regret—

> "A fall of voice,
> . . . the nightingale's last note."

## THE HEDGE-SPARROW.

I HAVE never been able to understand why Knapp called the Hedge-sparrow (*Accentor modularis*) "a prime favourite," for this bird, to my mind, lives a solitary life—a life almost unrecognised, worse even, unknown. Hedge-sparrows appear to pair for life, and when once they have mated, then complete adaptation to the various conditions of their unobtrusive lives renders them uninteresting, if not unrevealed to the casual stroller of the road. This is made the more difficult to believe, because, although there is a distinct migrational movement on the east coast, this little reddish-brown-backed bird is with us in greater or less numbers all the year round. Blind indeed must he be who has not seen it in his kitchen garden, in the woods, or in the hedges of the fields, spring, summer, autumn, and particularly winter.

If continually living with us constitutes sufficient grounds for a claim, then the hedge-sparrow deserves to be a favourite with us, for some live about our homesteads every month of the calendar, neither influenced by weather nor caprice to desert us. But we English need something a little more entertaining than mere

friendship; we require a red breast, a blue cap, a stump tail, a dashing flight, a chattering tongue or an over-billed head. We are not to be satisfied with a dusky little bird which draws near unto us in the winter, and does us no harm in the summer; we are only to be pleased with something out of the common, something startling!

The hedge-sparrow may have been Knapp's personal favourite—that is all. The bards have not deigned to recognise the harmless dunnock; its amiable disposition has not recommended it to them, and no bird can be a universal favourite without gaining the favour of the poet's pen. This is surprising, because if the poets are so well versed, as a class, with the phases of the fields, and have consequently restrained from forcing their poetic company among Nature's works, Nature's works very often seek the poets—like the hedge-sparrow—and humble themselves at their very feet in hard weather by hopping into the town gutters and drains to seek their daily bread.

The hedge-sparrow's trustfulness in man is misplaced and useless, for no fable guards his life. The nest, being badly concealed as a rule, becomes the booty of every prying youth, and nearly all oölogical collections I have seen have commenced with an assortment of the hedge-sparrow's light greenish-blue eggs. Then the young collector is not the only destroyer of the peace of the hedge-sparrow, for the parasitic cuckoo selects this bird quite as often as any other bird as the foster-

mother for its offspring, and it is pitiful to see the dunnock's neat little nest usurped by the ponderous carcass of a helpless fondling cuckoo. The hedge-sparrow is paid no deference by other birds, it is driven away from the crumbs by the pert and obnoxious sparrow, and brushed away from the window-sill by the smart and soldier-like robin; it is driven apart to itself as if it belonged to some leprous tribe.* It is indeed a lonely bird, its short, gentle song is rarely distinguishable in the olio of nature's unmimicable music. It has been called a *sparrow* by Shakespeare, and though others, well meaning, have tried to change this name into that of "Hedge-accentor" we are told that the hedge-sparrow must carry its damning name to the end of time. This hardship is intensified because as a matter of fact there is hardly an affinity by which these two birds ought to be able to carry the same name, and, save the colour, which at a distance appears the same, there is nothing to lead us into the delusion that any relation connects the domestic sparrow with the "Shufflewing" of the woods. Their very nests so disagree, the one being slovenly constructed anywhere, and the other being seldom far from the ground and elegantly built of roots, green moss, lined with hair and wool, that it is hard to make out why these two very different birds have been christened with the same title. It is not of the

* May not the singular disease, consisting of tubercular and carcinomatous excrescences upon the eyelids, base of bill and feet, be partly the cause of this severe treatment?

nest of the house-sparrow Wordsworth writes, but of the snug home of the hedge bird, when he says :—

> " Behold, within the leafy shade,
> Those bright-blue eggs together laid!
> On me the chance-discovered sight
> Gleamed like a vision of delight.
> I started—seeming to espy
> The home and sheltered bed,—
> The sparrow's dwelling, which, hard by
> My father's house, in wet or dry,
> My sister, Emmeline, and I,
> Together visited.
>
> " She * looked at it as if she feared it;
> Still wishing, dreading to be near it;
> Such heart was in her, being then
> A little prattler among men.
> The blessing of my later years
> Was with me when a boy:
> She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;
> And humble cares, and delicate fears;
> A heart; the fountain of sweet tears;
> And love, and thought, and joy."

Not because there is indeed any great merit in Wordsworth's verse, but principally because of the rarity of a poem proclaiming the existence of the hedge-sparrow, shall we remember these lines. Yet I am persuaded Wordsworth let egotism carry him too far when he said, on a re-visitation of this spot—

> " And in this bush our sparrow built her nest,
> Of which I sang one song that will not *die*."

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* The "She" here refers to Dorothy Wordsworth, who was sister and chief companion to the poet during his lifetime.

## THE TOMTIT.

It is surprising that the merry, restless inquisitiveness, the grotesque postures, and the ceaseless, cheerful calls of the Blue Titmouse (*Parus cæruleus*) while it hunts its food, have not been the means of introducing it more in the lines of the poets and into the legends of folklore. I cannot help feeling disappointed with the scantiness of poetry touching this bright little bird. Spenser writes one line about the titmouse and Montgomery five, the rest of the poets, with the exception of Wordsworth, who has written seventeen lines, have left the bird to its own fate, to gain admiration by its own happy antics unassisted.

In Wordsworth's poem, "The Kitten and the Fallen Leaves," we find the lines I have already alluded to, and they picture the tomtit charmingly—

> "Where is he that giddy sprite,
> Blue-cap, with his colours bright,
> Who was blest as bird could be,
> Feeding in the apple-tree;
> Made such wanton spoil and rout,
> Turning blossoms inside out;
> Hung with head towards the ground,
> Fluttered, perched, into a round
> Bound himself, and then unbound!

Lithest, gaudiest harlequin!
Prettiest tumbler ever seen!
Light of heart, and light of limb,
What is now become of him!" *

For fear these lines shall hereafter do titmice injury, I must ask the reader to peruse Mr. Newton's fourth edition of Yarrell's "British Birds," volume one, where he clearly points out the extremely little harm "Tits" do in reality. He says there are few birds which are commonly believed to do more harm than the blue titmouse, and nearly all gardeners regard it as one of their worst foes. They see it busily at work on a fruit tree, bud after bud

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* Mr. Robinson, for some reason best known to himself, transposes these lines, and makes them read:—

"Lithest, gaudiest harlequin!
Prettiest tumbler ever seen,
Light of heart and light of limb
What is now become of him?
Where is he that giddy sprite,
Blue-cap, with all his feathers bright,
Who was blest as bird could be,
Feeding on the apple-tree;
Made such wanton spoil and rout,
Turning blossoms inside out,
Hung with head towards the ground,
Fluttered, perched into a round,
Bound himself, and then unbound."

By placing the comma after the word "round" instead of after the word "perched," where it should be properly, Mr. Robinson has destroyed one of the prettiest lines of the poem.

coming under its scrutiny, while the protective covering of each drops on the ground and shows the destruction done. Content with such imperfect evidence, they go their way vowing vengeance on the blue-cap, and when they get the chance are mostly as good as their word. In many parishes in England a price not long since used to be paid by the churchwardens for the heads of this species and its congeners* under the general name of tomtits, on account of the loss they were believed to inflict on the gardeners. Yet none can be more mistaken than these stupid florists, who rarely know a friend from a foe. If they watched more closely they would see that while all the buds are looked over, some of them only are picked open. Often a single bird or the whole family party will alight on a tree, and after a very brief survey, will go on to the next, where, perhaps, a prolonged stay will be made. To man's eyes the two trees are just alike, and the buds at the same stage of growth, there is no seeming difference between any two on the same bough. The bird, however, knows better, the germ of the one is sound, that of the other infected, and hence the choice it uses. Hardly any portion of the bud itself is eaten; the egg or the insect already lodged there is the morsel sought. The bud, of course, when picked open, is in most cases utterly destroyed, but with it is

* Great Titmouse, Coal Titmouse, Marsh Titmouse, Crested Titmouse, and Long-tailed Titmouse. I do not know whether the Bearded Titmouse (*Panurus biarmicus*) was included.

also destroyed the potential destroyer of more buds than any one can tell. The damage of which the gardener thinks he sees the perpetration has really been done, perhaps some months before. There can, in truth, be little doubt that this titmouse, with others of the genus, is a very great benefactor to the horticulturist, and hardly ever more so than when the careless spectator of its deeds is supposing it to be bent on mischief.

The evidence of numerous attentive observers might be adduced in support of the statement just advanced. Selby says that he is convinced of the accusations having been "inconsiderately made." Knapp gives details of the number of insects the blue-cap destroys, and declaims against the custom of rewarding its destruction. Mr. Weir, with his usual perseverance, observed that a pair fed their young four hundred and seventy-five times in the space of seventeen hours, sometimes bringing a single large caterpillar, at other times two or three small ones. Thompson, who examined the stomach of a number of examples from December to March, finding them to contain the remains of insects, and very few of them any vegetation, remarks that this bird is "savagely slaughtered" in the very act of saving the buds by means which man with all his power could not employ. Mr. Stevenson also observes on the hatred shown to the bird by gardeners that "even the most obstinate of that opinionated race need but dissect the next victim of his folly to know that he has killed a friend." Mr. Bond has supplied Messrs. Sharpe and Dresser with

the results of his experience to the effect that the titmouse feeds its young very much with the small larvæ of the gooseberry moth, that well-known ravager of gardens, to say nothing of *aphides* and other insects, while it also preys on the grubs of the wood-boring beetles, including *Scolytus destructor*, the worst foe of the elm, and on maggots from the round galls so common on young oaks.

I would further warn the reader from considering these birds as bee destroyers. It is not likely they do this in Shropshire and no where else, for I must say, although I have watched carefully, I have never seen a titmouse plunder a hive. This appears to me to be only the peculiarity of comparatively few specimens.

## THE WREN.

(*Troglodytes Europæus.*)

THE name "Troglodytes" which has been given to the Wren, when we remember the Æthiopian Troglodytidæ who lived the austere life of shepherds in dark and sunless caves and holes, is a poem in itself. Could any one conceive a better adapted technical cognomen? One better suited to its subject? Troglodytes is indisputably the only name worthy of being bestowed upon the little "wren with his little quill." But the poets have not availed themselves of their opportunity; they have been content rather to versify the wren as "busy," "tiny woodland dwarf," or—

> "A wren, light rustling
> Among the leaves and twigs."

No one has used the meaning of "Troglodytes" with better effect than Wordsworth has:—

> "Pleasant to him who on the soft cool moss
> Extends his careless limbs along the front
> Of some huge cave, whose rocky ceiling casts
> A twilight of its own, and ample shade,

Where the wren warbles; while the dreaming man,
Half conscious of the soothing melody,
With sidelong eye looks out upon the scene,
By power of that impending covert thrown
To finer distance."

Again he speaks of the wren as a cave-haunting bird in his poem, "The Brownie's Cell" *:—

"Nor autumn, when the viewless wren
Is warbling near the Brownie's den."

Here, I would remind the reader, the wren is pictured amongst vaults rather then caves. Besides its name, the wren is surrounded by legends which should be "happy hunting grounds" for the poets. Together with the eagle, the Indo-European tradition regarded it as a bringer-down of fire for men from heaven, hence it is hostile to the eagle, and as far back as Pliny's time was deemed the king of birds. Many of the appellations which this bird shares in European languages to some extent with the golden-crested wren, are "Basiliskos," "Regulus," "Reyezuelo," "Reatino," "Roitelet," "Zaunkönig," "Kungsfogel," "Ellekonge," "Winterkoninkje," etc., all names indicative of majestic dignity.

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* "The Brownie's Cell" was suggested to Wordsworth by a beautiful ruin upon one of the islands of Loch Lomond, a place chosen for the retreat of a solitary individual from whom this habitation acquired its name.

Further than this, a strife once arose between the "wide-ruling eagle" and the "grave and solemn wren,"* according to the Irish legend, from the agreement of the birds that which ever of them could mount the higher should be their king. The knavish little wren slyly hopped on to his rival's tail unknown to the eagle, as they proceeded to make the decisive trial. But when the eagle was towering miles above the rest, pluming himself that his was the day, and too exhausted to struggle higher, the roguish wren darted upwards and loudly declared its superiority in song. From that day to this the wren has never been able to fly higher than a hawthorn bush, for the eagle, enraged, though obliged to confess himself vanquished, gave the wren a mighty stroke with his wing as he wearily descended. Well may Tennyson ask:—

> "Shall eagles not be eagles? wrens be wrens?"

Again the Wren is believed to assist the robin in his sextonship to unburied humanity:—

> "Call for the robin redbreast and the wren,
> Since over shady groves they hover,
> And with leaves and flowers do cover
> The friendless bodies of unburied men."

Shall we also not remember:—

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* Faber: "The Wren."

"The robin and the wren
Are God Almighty's cock and hen.
Who harries their nest
Never shall his soul have rest."

Alas! all the folklore connected with the wren is not protective. The strangest fact coupled with the legendary history of the wren is the curious persecution it has, or rather I am glad to be able to say had, to submit to in numerous countries on St. Stephen's Day.

Charles Smith, in his "State of the County of Cork," seems to have been the first to allude to this objectionable usage. On Christmas Day boys and men, armed with two sticks each, marched out in a body to hunt and kill the wren, which, from its unfortunate habit of only making short, insignificant flights, was speedily put to death. On the following day, the feast of St. Stephen, the little corpse, slung by the leg between two hoops, crossed at right angles and gorgeously bedecked with brilliant ribbons, was carried about by the "wren-boys," who sang a song, commmencing, so says Mr. Norman Moore,—"Droeilin, Droeilin, ri an t-eum," (*i.e.* Wren, wren, king of birds), and solicited money "to buy the wren." I am pleased to think that the Mayor of Cork for 1845 issued a proclamation forbidding the continuance of this senseless destruction. Cork, however, is not the only town where this historical slaughter has been successfully perpetrated. The same practice has been in force in the Isle of Man, and in Pembrokeshire, where on Twelfth-day, a wren was carried from house to house

in a box with glass windows, surmounted by a wheel to which ribbons were hung. In Essex, the same custom is (or was until lately) acted upon, boys chasing and slaying wrens, and then bearing them from house to house singing :—

> "The wren, the wren, the king of the birds,
> St. Stephen's Day, was killed in the furze;
> Although he is little, his honour is great;
> And so, good people, pray give us a treat." *

A century ago at La Civitat, near Marseilles, the wren's murderers actually equipped themselves with swords and pistols—luxuries in those days—and their minute victim was paraded through the village as if a heavy carcass, slung to a pole, and suspended from the shoulders of two sturdy yeomen. It was carried with great pomp and dignity to a huge pair of scales, and having been gravely weighed, the company present gave themselves up to unmitigated festivity.

It seems that there exists no valid explanation of this singular custom; indeed, it is for antiquaries to throw light on the origin of this most extraordinary conventionality. In Ireland it has been ascribed to a wren which, alighting on a drum, roused and saved from defeat some Protestant troops in the Irish civil

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* Another version of this song ran :—

> "The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,
> St. Stephen's Day, was caught in a furze;
> Sing holly, sing ivy, sing ivy, sing holly,
> A drop to drink just to cure melancholy."

wars of the seventeenth century. This is recorded by Aubrey as taking place at Glinsuly, in Donegal. He says:—"Near the same place a party of Protestants had been surprised sleeping by the Popish Irish were it not for several wrens, that just wakened them by dancing and pecking on the drums as the enemy were approaching. For this reason the wild Irish mortally hate these birds to this day, calling them the devil's servants, and killing them wherever they catch them. They teach their children to thrust them full of thorns. You will see sometimes, on holidays, a whole parish running like madmen from hedge to hedge a wren-hunting." This may have re-kindled the enthusiasm of the Irish Popish population to slay without mercy the robin's imaginary mate; but some centuries earlier, in the wars of the Danish occupation of Ireland, a similar slaughter evidently was in vogue. Some say that the Druids venerated the wren with such superstitious respect that they gave offence to the early Christian missionaries, who commanded its persecution by all adherents to the new faith. Another version is extant in the Isle of Man, where the wren is believed to be a transformed fairy; for once upon a time a fairy of great malevolence oppressed the island, until a knight-errant tried to destroy her. At the last moment, however, she saved herself by slipping through his fingers in the shape of a wren. Hence, every New Year's Day (when a spell condemned her to re-appear in the same form), wrens are remorselessly hunted down and destroyed on

the island. The wonder is that these cruel practices do not prevail amongst the Scotch section of the Celtic race; nay, in Scotland a popular rhyme protects the wren by putting it under the care of the Virgin.

> "Malisons, malisons, mair than ten,
> Who harries the Ladye of Heaven's wren." *

The many coincidences seem to lead back rather to the ancient legend which tells of the wren's impertinence to the eagle, and its importance as the king of the birds. The Pembrokeshire ceremony took place on Twelfth-day —the feast of the Three Kings—and the wren was also spoken of as the king. In Essex it is again called king, and although we in England do not ascribe royal elevation to our little favourite, but call it "Kitty" or "Jenny" Wren, yet the exotic languages I have quoted all point to majestic qualities.

What advantage these old traditions give to the poets! They afford them substance for many gems of literature which are never born. These legends, although it might have justly been expected, have not gained the wren any extra position in ornithological poetry; indeed, as far as they are concerned, the wren might not exist. Wordsworth is no exception.

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* This often may be found quoted—

> "Malisons, malisons, mair than ten,
> *Are* harries the *Queen* of Heaven's wren."

Shakespeare's Portia paid little tribute to the wren's voice when she said—

> "The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark,
> When neither is attended; and, I think,
> The nightingale, if she should sing by day,
> When every goose is cackling, would be thought
> No better a musician than the wren."

This is damning with faint praise a pure and lively strain—a strain sometimes heard even, as Graham says—

> "When icicles hang dripping from the rock."

Wordsworth notices the fact set forth by the Scotch poet in perhaps more descriptive words—

> "To the bleak winds she sometimes gives
> A slender unexpected strain;
> That tells the hermitess still lives,
> Though she appear not, and be sought in vain."

But he pays more honour than this to the

> "Darkling wren
> That tunes on Duddon's bank her slender voice."

In his Elegiac stanzas we have a sweet picture:—

> "The wren that sings
> In shady places to proclaim
> Her modest gratitude."

Or what could be more enchanting than the way he

makes the little reddish-brown wren a finder of a "leafy cage" amongst the scattered parts of dissolved monasteries, flying now amidst the quenched tapers, and now higher into the mute belfry, warbling

> "'Mid the choir unroofed by selfish rage."

It is not, though, in describing the wren's haunts and song that Wordsworth excels; it is in his description of the bird's wonderfully-constructed nest. Odd spots are chosen by the wren for her home, and those who love to watch the movements of this bird, one of the most remarkable architects without hands—

> "A box, perchance, is from your casement hung,
> For the small wren to build in."

Wrens often first trace the outline of the structure of their nests by sticking bits of moss against the tree, bank, wall, or other place selected, and probably attach these with spiders' webs, and thus secure all parts with equal strength, afterwards enclosing the sides and top, and leaving a small hole for entrance and exit. This is not always the case; the wren frequently commences with a foundation, and builds upwards like other birds. By unflagging toil, the nest, which is large in comparison with the size of the bird, generally oval in shape, and plentifully lined with feathers, but sometimes as Wordsworth records a—

> "Moss-lined shed, green, soft, and dry,"

is completed in eight days. Great care is taken by the wren to select her exterior material adapted to the situation of her nest. Montagu notices that if the nest is built against the side of a hayrick it is composed of hay; if against a tree covered with white lichen it is studded with that material, and formed of green moss if against a tree overgrown with the same. Wood declares that if the wren builds in a raspberry bush the whole structure is composed of raspberry leaves. If the nest be placed amongst the rubbish heap of a kitchen garden it is a difficult matter to discover it; and it is probable it will only be discovered by the birds flying in and out. But who has described the wren's habitation with greater care, in prettier language, or in more imperishable words than Wordsworth?

Thus does he write his excellent account of the most curious part of the wren's existence:—

"Among the dwellings framed by birds
In field or forest with nice care,
Is none that with the little wren's
In snugness may compare.

"No door the tenement requires,
And seldom needs a laboured roof;
It is to the fiercest sun
Impervious and storm-proof.

"So warm, so beautiful withal,
In perfect fitness for its aim,
That to the kind by special grace
Their instinct surely came.

"And when for their abodes they seek
An opportune recess,
The Hermit has no finer eye
For shadowy quietness.

"These find 'mid ivied Abbey walls
A canopy in some still nook;
Others are pent-housed by a brae
That overhangs a brook.

"There to the brooding bird her mate
Warbles by fits his low clear song;
And by the busy streamlet both
Are sung to all day long.

"Or in sequestered lanes they build,
Where, till the flitting bird's return,
Her eggs within the nest repose,
Like relics in an urn.

"But still, where general choice is good,
There is a better and a best;
And, among fairest objects, some
Are fairer than the rest;

"This, one of those small builders proved
In a green covert, where, from out
A forehead of a pollard oak,
The leafy antlers sprout;

"For she who planned the mossy lodge,
Mistrusting her evasive skill,
Had to a primrose looked for aid
Her wishes to fulfil.

"High on the trunk's projecting brow,
And fixed an infant's span above
And budding flowers, peeped forth the nest
The prettiest of the grove!

"The treasure proudly did I show
To some whose minds without disdain
Can turn to little things, but once
Looked up for it in vain.

"'Tis gone—a ruthless spoiler's prey,
Who heeds not beauty, love, or song,
'Tis gone! (so seemed it) and we grieved,
Indignant at the wrong.

"Just three days after, passing by
In clearer light the moss-built cell
I saw, espied its shaded mouth,
And felt that all was well.

"The primrose for a veil had spread
The largest of her upright leaves;
And thus, for purposes benign,
A simple flower deceives.

"Concealed from friends who might disturb
Thy quiet with no ill intent,
Secure from evil eyes and hands
On barbarous plunder bent.

"Rest, mother-bird! and when thy young
Take flight, and thou art free to roam,
When withered is the guardian flower,
And empty thy late home,

"Think how ye prospered, thou and thine,
Amid the unviolated grove
Housed near the growing primrose tuft
In foresight, or in love."

To my mind this equals in elegance of diction and fine poetic inspiration Grahame's beautiful lines:—

"The little woodland dwarf, the tiny wren,
That from the root-sprigs trills her ditty clear,
Of statue most diminutive herself;
Not in her wondrous house; for, strange to tell,
Hers is the largest structure, that is formed
By turnpost bill and breast. 'Neath some old root
From which the sloping soil by wintry rain
Has been all worn away, she fixes up
Her curious dwelling, close and vaulted o'er,
And on this side a little gateway porch,
In which (for I have seen) she'll sit and pipe
A merry stave of her shrill roundelay.

* * * * *

Here read the reason of the vaulted roof;
Here providence compensates, ever kind,
The enormous disproportion that subsists
Between the mother and the numerous brood
Which her small bulk must quicken into life,
Fifteen white spherules.

* * * * *

Complete her number, now five days she sits,
Fed by her partner, never flitting off,
Save when the morning sun is high, to drink
A dewdrop from the nearest flow'ret cup.

* * * * *

But now behold the greatest of this train
Of miracles, stupendously minute;
The numerous progeny, demanding food,
Supplied by two small bills and feeble wings
Of narrow range; supplying, aye duly fed,
Fed in the dark, and yet not one forgot."

One fact more is worth notice. When the wren builds her nest there is generally surrounding it, or in the vicinity, a number of other nests known commonly as "cocks' nests." These are supposed to be constructed

by the male bird for his dwellings at night time; others say they are the molested and consequently forsaken houses of the old birds. I think, though, the best suggestion which has been yet published is that these extra nests are built to be subsequently used as houses of refuge for the "self-contented wren," as Wordsworth calls her, and her family during the cold months of winter. We are told that wrens endure a frosty winter's night by uniting and roosting in company in some sheltered hole in a wall or under a thatched roof. Jardine says that of an evening eight or nine wrens may be seen entering one of these retreats, and, when all is quiet, a hand thrust into the hole will find them all huddled together, surrounded by the feathers collected by the sparrows, and the degree of heat thus kept up is much greater than their small bulk would at first be thought capable to maintain. If they cannot procure such refuges they will resort to their own nests, and Selby says he has frequently found together the bodies of several, which had thus sought protection and warmth during severe storms. Herbert also says that under like circumstances and for like reason they often roost in cow-houses. It is my firm belief that these extra nests are constructed by the old birds for their progeny in winter time. Why should not the wren possess this marvellous foresight? This is by far the most likely proposition, and consequently it should be the one to receive the most favour.

I believe the poets have been ignorant of this strange

fact; and I am satisfied that it would have never been recorded in poetry had not Wordsworth said—

> "This moss-lined shed, green, soft and dry,
> Harbours a self-contented wren,
> Not shunning man's abode, though shy,
> Almost as thought itself, of human ken.
>
> "Strange places, coverts unendeared
> She never tried, *the very nest*
> *In which* this *child of spring* was reared,
> Is warmed, *through winter*, by her feathery breast."

## THE SWALLOW.

THERE is nothing, ornithologically speaking, in the whole of Wordsworth's writings so commonplace and disappointing as his scanty, and I will dauntlessly say, worthless, references to our most pleasing summer visitor, the Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*). These references, few in number, are totally inadequate to do the bird its deserved justice. So disproportionate are they to the value of their subject, that I have often endeavoured to take a mental estimate of their positive weakness; and while I have thus occupied myself I have been, as it were, forced to compare Wordsworth's treatment of the swallow with its treatment by other poets. And I have come to this conclusion: If Wordsworth's notices are poor they are not exceptional, being rather a fair representation of the notices the swallow has generally received by poetic pens.

From the time of Aristotle the swallow has been a harbinger of summer time, and although the proverb, "One swallow does not make a summer," is as true as it was B.C. 322, yet we love the swallow, and look upon it as a fleet messenger of summer days, welcome

it to these isles with joy, and wait its arrival in impatient expectation. Wordsworth has written two lines about this bird which are more especially worthy of our notice, and when we have read these we read the only quotation from his poems which is of any material value:—

> "The fleet swallow, making rings
> In the smooth lake where'er he dips his wings." *

This is a characteristic sketch of the swallow's dipping habit. It is said that when the swallow is migrating it is not unfrequently seen to even alight on the water, and presently fly off again and proceed upon its wonderful journeyings.

The swallow's flight is described by Wordsworth as "wheeling," and its nest is made a simile:—

> "Thy towers, that cleave, like swallows' nests on high."

The nest is called "pendent" in "Vandracour and Julia"—

> "As the swallow
> Fluttering its pinions, almost within reach,
> About the pendent nest."

These lines would perhaps better describe the nest of the house martin (*Hirundo urbica*). Another introduction of this bird into the pages of Wordsworth may be found in "A Morning Exercise." Words-

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* Wordsworth: "A Morning Exercise."

worth when substantiating Samuel Coleridge's answer to Milton's melancholy nightingale tells us that it is at fancy's bidding that—

"The swallow twittered."

These pretty well comprise Wordsworth's notices of our foreflighter of good tidings, and I doubt not that every one who happens to have read the writings of the great Lake poets will have, before he reads this, considered them very niggardly recognitions.

They are the more aggravating—for aggravating they must be to every lover of the swallow — because the bird is radiant with its unsurpassed beauty, its striking life of self-reliance, by historical narrative and by legendary attribute.

What have the poets missed? or shall I say neglected?

"The swallow," says Davy, "is one of my favourite birds, and a rival of the nightingale; for he cheers my sense of seeing as much as the other does my sense of hearing."

How we all have at one time or another envied Progne—for you will remember when Philomela was transformed into a nightingale Progne, her sister, was transformed into a swallow—her flight. Man has always wished to fly; we have ever envied the superior locomotion which is the feathered tribe's one great super-eminence. While they progress, making the same figure-of-eight curves as we do, their pinions are

experiencing a superiority we little think of, although at every stride we take we are cruelly re-awakened to the undeniable fact. While we as we walk along are encountering the *maximum* of *resistance* and occasioning the *minimum* of *displacement*, they are as they wing the liquid air effecting the *maximum* of *displacement* and experiencing the *minimum* of *resistance*. Where is the poetry of motion in the most exquisite ballet dancer whoever appeared before the foot-lights, when compared to that poetry of motion which belongs to flight alone? The birds and the other winged creatures travel the only perfect highway of nature—the sublime, shoreless and rockless and unfortified ocean of air. Think of the great highway of nations, the ocean of salt water, and then think of that vaster ocean of ether; that ocean so thin and clear, that submerges all the hills and valleys of the world, and in which not even the highest mount was ever islanded! Well may Mr. Hamerton say disdainfully, "We are grovelling at the bottom of it, like star-fish in the mud of the Atlantic; but the birds are its swift fishes, having wings for fins, and they alone have the freedom of the blue that is above us." What sublime evolutions are those that Progne uses when she is hungry and in need of her daily supply! Why, the albatross, though it can sail in the air for a whole hour without once moving its wings, cannot display such unsurpassed motion? And how have we to read about these motions in poetry? Is not the swallow's flight worthy of a finer description than "wheeling," "dart-

ing," or "skimming"? words more suited to describe the several movements of a wheel-barrow, an arrow, and a stone thrown to skip along the surface of some village pond! Do not let us forget that a bird is not stronger, weight for weight, than a fish, or a man; that it is not inflated with air as Michelet would have us believe, but has to propel itself through a medium which offers little resistance, truly, but which provides little if any support. Think of what the swallows perform twice—and perhaps more often if they arrive here too soon—a year. They come to us travelling along this vast highway from Africa. They cross the Mediterranean, and either flying over sunny France or sunnier Spain, come to these shores—shores too often uncongenial, unprepared by the great preparer of all things, sun. Imagine this flight, the self-reliance which it needs! If we were about to make the journey we should need refreshment-rooms placed along the road, and a saloon, or at least a compartment of some kind, and a basket of provisions, before we considered ourselves properly equipped. But the swallows have no more preparation than the unfolding of their pinions—of the wings we have vainly striven time after time to copy. There is also that stern discipline amongst migratory birds which is as stern as the discipline exacted from any soldier under the flag. No staying or stopping because of sickness! No detailing off of a batch to comfort and rally the dying! Once the flight has started there is no halting, the vast army proceeds

with as strict rigour as an army under a Cæsar or a Wellington. Arrived in numbers far inferior to when they commenced their travels north—for the French have slain hundreds by electricity to appease the cruel needs of fashion!—in this country the swallows at once attach themselves to the habitations of man, and begin a slaughter of gnats and crane-flies which must be beneficial to him. These are—never mind how fatigued the swallow may be—sought for the whole day long in spots which they specially select for themselves, which though little sheltered, may provide a greater supply of their insectivorous food. What power of recollection have they that unfailingly guides them back to their nests which are so beautifully modelled, out of small lumps of moist earth so carefully tempered by saliva, in the shape of a half-saucer or mere rim, which owing to the peculiarities of the site is sufficient mason-work to hold its precious burden? The homes of the swallows are built in unaccountable situations, frequently inside a chimney, in a disused shaft of a mine, an old wall, in sheds, barns, or any buildings with open roofs in which a horizontal beam, or wall-plate, or a girder is to be found. Clock-turrets, bridges of wood and of iron, and the eaves of a friendly cottage are not despised, and so familiar is the swallow with man, that it will often enter inhabited dwellings—if a window always be kept open, or a broken pane of glass allowed to remain unmended, and build its nest of soil on a shelf or any convenient buttress. These nests should never be pulled down,

for there still lives a superstition that it is extremely lucky for a swallow to build about one's house. Ælian says that the swallow was sacred to the Penates or household gods, and therefore to injure one would be to bring wrath upon your own house. Why, the Egyptian hieroglyph of prosperity is a swallow! In the North of England if a swallow tumbles down a chimney, woe to the inmates; it portends a death in the house as certainly as seeing three butterflies together; and again, strange to narrate, the unfathomable inconsistency of the Irish has taught them to call poor Progne "the devil's bird," because it is believed that there is a certain hair on every one's head, which if the swallow can pick off, the man is doomed not only to death but to eternal perdition.

The situations I have already mentioned as likely for swallows to build in are the common places chosen, yet many exceptional sites have been recorded—a bracket, a picture frame, and a bell-crank among others. The wings of a dead owl have served the little mason, the loop of a chain in a boat-house and a half-opened drawer of a table have often furnished the needful accommodation; newspapers have, ere this, recorded steam-tugs, and Plutarch tells us that Cleopatra's galley is to be included in the category; but all failing, the bough of a sycamore has once been used.* Mr. C. G. Leroy, who filled the post of Ranger of Versailles about a century ago, anticipated that if our observations extended

* Romanes: "Animal Intelligence."

over a sufficient length of time, and in a manner sufficiently close, we should find that the accumulation of intelligent improvements by individuals of successive generations would begin to tell upon the inherited instinct, so that all the nests in a given locality would attain to a higher grade of excellence, and M. Pouchet has recorded that he has found a decided improvement to have taken place in the nests of swallows at Rouen during his lifetime.

Shall we not further remember the picture of love when the nest is completed and the hen bird is busy incubating? Shall we forget how assiduous the male bird is, now waiting upon his spouse, now pausing in his flight to perch on some place so that they can hear each other call; and now, with heart too full to resist, breaking into his soft, sweet strain which the poets have only characterized as "chattering," "twittering," or confusion worse confounded, "prating"?

Then follows—after the parent bird has brought home from the sea-shore that stone which Longfellow, in "Evangeline," reminds us of when he says,

> "Oft in the barns they climbed to the populous nests on the rafters,
> Seeking with eager eyes that wondrous stone which the swallow
> Brings from the shore of the sea to restore the sight to its fledglings;
> Lucky was he who found that stone in the nest of the swallow!"—

that perfect picture of happiness which no artist has yet been able to portray. The young have left the nest and

have scrambled or fluttered to the chimney-top or to a roof somewhere near, and there they sit and are fed by their ever-industrious parents. What a pleasing picture this is, one with a background of infinite love! Accordingly as their wings strengthen their bravery expands, and the next flight they try is to reach some leafless bough, from whence at intervals they make excursions in the air of gradually increasing length; nevertheless, they are still unable to collect their own food. Soon a bolder trial of the wings is made, yet still being unable to feed themselves, they follow their parents, who labour to supply an appetite which makes its owner cry incessantly for satisfaction, but which is not ungrateful. Generally when a second brood is fledged, but too weak to fly far, and not old enough to exist without parental care, that mysterious impulse—which Leroy says is not sufficiently imperative to induce the late hatched birds to undertake the journey by themselves—seizes the older birds, and they are forced to leave their tardy young to perish, victims of their ignorance. One day after we have watched them anxiously preparing, they have disappeared so abruptly, so mysteriously, and so totally, that the great naturalist, White of Selborne, gives ear to a Brighthelmstone school-boy's tale and thinks they have wintered in a state of torpidity,* whilst the learned Dr. John-

* Pliny's idea that swallows only retire to the sunny recesses of neighbouring mountains in the winter, and when found are without feathers, may have swayed White's judgment.

son* gives it as his opinion that they have conglobulated together and, all in a heap, thrown themselves under the water to lie in the bed of a river asleep through the winter's bitter months.

This, then, comprises some quarter of the material Wordsworth might have used; being a strict Nature poet we have a right to excuse his indifference to myths and folk-lore. Yet it is a pity that such a writer as Wordsworth should have neglected to use that substance which so enlightens verse.

As if there are not sufficient facts in the natural history of Progne to build upon, we have a legendary historic swallow, a bird which reproached Bessus—so a parricide observed who discovered the nest of swallows—the Bactuana murderer of Darius, by rearing its brood of peace during the Arbela battle. Again, the horrible crimes of Tereus taught the swallows to hate Byzia, the possession of the kings of Thrace, and the bird, moreover, that will not build at Thebes, because it has been so often captured by storm.† Was not the swallow the bringer together of our first parents from Serendib and Jedda after their fall?

The poets have evidently been so captivated with the

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* Boswell's "Johnson," ii. p. 56, ed. 1816.

† This is assuredly not for the want of training, for swallows have taken an important part in wars in the days of yore. A certain Cæcina was wont to take swallows with him on campaigns and let them fly home, having first rubbed on them the colour indicative of victory.

idea of Philomela being transported into a nightingale that they have altogether forgotten that the Athenian king had two daughters, and that Philomela's sister, Progne, was transformed into a swallow! Surely this is a gross piece of wanton forgetfulness! Does not legend make the swallow the bird which Noah loosed from his ark when the dove failed him? and is it not a fact that the swallow—the Tzipperderor—was the offering which a leper made at the cleansing of his hideous infirmities? But the prettiest legend I have childishly left to the last: it comes from Scandinavia, and gives the swallow its name. When our Lord was crucified the swallow hovered over the cross, ever crying "Svala! Svala!" (*Console! Console!*), whence it is called Svalow (the bird of consolation).

## THE GREENFINCH.

CANON Tristram, in an often-quoted passage, says: "In the desert, where neither trees, brushwood, nor even undulations of the surface afford the slightest protection to its foes, a modification of colour which shall be assimilated to that of the surrounding country is absolutely necessary.* Hence, without exception, the upper plumage of every bird, whether lark, chat, sylvan, or sand-grouse, and also the fur of all the smaller animals, and the skin of all the snakes and lizards, is of one uniform isabelline or sand-colour." Again, Prof. Wallace writes, "The fact that first strikes us in our examination of the colours of animals as a whole, is the close relation that exists between these colours and the general environment."

In all temperate regions, where the leaves are deciduous, it is a fact that the ground colour of the

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* Those who would study the acute truth of this statement should visit the case at the South Kensington, presented by Col. Worthingham, which stands, or did stand, in the main entrance.

great majority of birds, especially on the upper surface, is a rusty brown of various shades, corresponding with the bark, withered leaves, ferns, and bare thickets among which they live in autumn and winter, and especially in early spring, when so many of them build their nests. Now, to my mind, the brown which Morris speaks so much about is not to be compared as a protective with the dull, dark olive of the green linnet (*Coccothraustes chloris*). Of all English birds, the greenfinch—or the green grosbeak—is best adapted to its position in Nature. Its colour makes it almost imperceptible to all who are not adepts at ornithology. The bright gamboge-yellow of its primary feathers and the bright golden-green of the least wing-coverts, do not foil the hiding powers of its other plumage, but rather complete than destroy the bird's perfect adaptation. How well these yellow feathers agree with the almost bursting buds of a sycamore, the young leaves of a lime, and the young shoots of a spruce-fir when the sun is playing upon them! With regard to the olive-green of the bird's head, neck, mantle, scapulars and back, could any two colours be more akin to one another than it is to the foliage of late spring—the time it nests—summer and early autumn? Or again, could any colour be more fitly chosen to match the chlorophylled trunk of an elm?

No wonder that the green linnet has not been recognised by the majority of poets. If one would see the greenfinch he must not lie on his back all day, like

a Keats or a Leigh Hunt, but must be up and doing like a Wordsworth; he must wander along the hedge-rows—

> "Through interminable forests,
> Over meadow, over mountain,
> Over river, hill, and hollow."
>
> * * * * *
>
> "Through the woodland and the meadow."

The greenfinch is so completely concealed that it is far more natural for Wordsworth to notice it than even Shakespeare; and such is the case, for while the latter has no word for the bird, the former has constructed this charming ode:—

### THE GREEN LINNET.

> "Beneath these fruit-tree boughs that shed
> Their snow-white blossoms on thy head,
> With brightest sunshine round me spread
> Of springs unclouded weather;
> In this sequestered nook how sweet
> To sit upon my orchard-seat!
> And birds and flowers once more to greet,
> My last year's friends together.
>
> "One have I marked, the happiest guest
> In all this covert of the blest;
> Hail to thee, far above the rest
> In joy of voice and pinion.
> Thou, linnet! in thy green array,
> Presiding spirit here to-day,
> Dost lead the revels of the May,
> And this is thy dominion.

"While birds, and butterflies, and flowers,
Make all one band of paramours,
Thou, ranging up and down the bowers,
Art sole in thy employment;
A life, a presence like the air,
Scattering thy gladness without care,
Too blest with any one to pair,
Thyself thy own enjoyment.

"Upon yon tuft of hazel trees,
That twinkle to the gusty breeze,
Behold him perched in ecstasies,
Yet seeming still to hover;
There! where the flutter of his wings
Upon his back and body flings
Shadows and sunny glimmerings,
That cover him all over.

"*My sight he dazzles, half deceives,*
*A bird so like the dancing leaves;*
Then flits, and from the cottage eaves
Pours forth his song in gushes;
As if by that exulting strain
He mocked and treated with disdain
The voiceless form he chose to feign,
While fluttering in the bushes."

## THE SPARROW.

To say positively whether the Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) has ever been mentioned by Wordsworth is difficult. It is true that we get the word "sparrow" in his ecclesiastical sketch entitled "Persuasion," but it is impossible to say whether the sparrow here penned—a poetical repetition of a bird's name mentioned in prose in Eadwine's reign—is any distinct or distinguishable bird, or merely a member of the "many sparrows"—many Passerine birds = many small birds—of the Bible.*

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* This difficulty is developed by the ancient English name of the sparrow being *Sparwe*, the Anglo-Saxon being *Spearwa*, akin to the old High German *Sparo* (now *Sper* ling), the Icelandic *Spörr*, the Danish words *Spurv* and *Spurre*, the Swedish *Sparf*, and the Gothic *Sparwa*—words probably originally meaning the "Quiverer" or the "Flutterer"; and akin to the English word *Spurn*, to kick or toss up the heels. This word *spurn*, from which *Sparrow* may have originated, would suit many of our English birds, the corn-bunting in particular. To illustrate the probability of this theory it is only necessary to remember that the word *Spavin*, indicating a disease often found on the leg bones

Wordsworth's sketch is based upon the strange conversion of Northumbria, and is a poetic rendering of that mighty burst of enthusiastic eloquence which seems to have, as it were, overpowered one of the king's old Ealdormen. Thus reads the sketch:—

> "Man's life is like a sparrow, mighty king!
> That, stealing in while by the fire you sit
> Housed with rejoicing friends, is seen to flit
> Safe from the storm, in comfort tarrying.
> Here did it enter—there, on hasty wing
> Flies out, and passes on from cold to cold;
> But whence it came we know not, nor behold
> Whither it goes. Even such that transient thing,
> The human soul; not utterly unknown
> While in the body lodged, her warm abode;
> But from what world she came, what woe or weal
> On her departure waits, no tongue hath shown.
> This mystery, if the stranger can reveal,
> His be a welcome cordially bestowed!"

Such is Wordsworth's translation of those never-to-be-forgotten words of exultation which literally broke loose from the mouth of an aged Ealdorman, after the Northumbrian King, in whose reign "a woman with

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of horses, attended with exostosis, or not uncommonly discoverable as a "bog spavin," a soft swelling produced by distensions of the capsular ligament of the hock, both making the horse raise the infirm leg, is undoubtedly derived from the old English *Sparveyne*, old French *esparvain*, French *éparvin* (akin to old French *espervier*, a sparrow-hawk), French *epervier*, from old High German *Sparwari* (German *Sperber*), from *Sparo* = Sparrow.

her babe might walk scatheless from sea to sea," had accepted the new faith—the faith of his Kentish wife and of his tall, thin-faced son, Paulinus. We shall do well to recall to our minds this striking event which forms the groundwork of Wordsworth's sketch. When Eadwine accepted the new religion of Christianity, which to finer minds had its charm in the light it threw on the darkness which encompassed men's lives, the darkness of the future as of the past, an Ealdorman who had attended that most characteristic of all councils, exclaimed—"So seems the life of man, O king, as a sparrow's flight through the hall when you are sitting at meat in winter-tide, with the warm fire lighted on the hearth, but the icy rain-storm without. The sparrow flies in at one door and tarries for a moment in the light and heat of the hearth-fire, and then, flying forth from the other, vanishes into the wintry darkness whence it came. So tarries for a moment the life of man in our sight, but what is before it, what after it, we know not. If this new teaching tells us aught certainly of these, let us follow it." This, however, was not the argument that told upon the masses assembled, they needed something plainer, coarser and bolder—something which lendeth not itself so exquisitely to a poem. When Eadwine therefore exclaimed, "Who shall first desecrate the altars and the temples?" Coifi, a chief priest, stirred the multitude on to their duty by saying—"I; for who more fit than myself, through the wisdom which the true God hath given me to destroy, for the

good example of others, what in foolishness I worshipped. None of your people, Eadwine, have worshipped the gods more busily than I, yet there are many more favoured and more fortunate." What wonder that the people were surprised at such words as these, and such actions as were to follow them. For immediately after thus speaking he set the example himself, and having besought the king to grant him, what the laws did not allow a priest, arms and a courser, which he mounted, and furnished with a sword and lance, proceeded to destroy the idols he had himself paid deference to, and having satisfied his thirst for revenge on the images of the deity, he hurled his spear into the sacred temple at Godenanham, and with the rest of Witan embraced the religion of the king.

## THE LINNET.

FOLLOWING the now generally adopted classification of British birds which allots to the thrush family the nearest position attainable by a feathered creature to man, "erect and tall," I find Wordsworth has noticed Shenstone's "artless linnet," or Graham's "linnet of the roseate plumes."

Wordsworth has several times made the Linnet (*Acanthis cannabina*) the complement of the thrush; if he has not done this, he has, *vice versâ*, made the thrush the counterpart of the linnet. We see this more distinctly, perhaps, in a fine passage I have already quoted:—

> "At length I to a sudden turning came
> In this continuous glen, where down a rock
> The stream, so ardent in its course before,
> Sent forth such sallies of glad sound, that all
> Which I till then had heard appeared the voice
> Of common pleasure: beast and bird, the lamb,
> The shepherd's dog, the *Linnet* and the *Thrush*
> Vied with this waterfall, and made a song
> Which, while I listened, seemed like the wild growth
> Or like some natural produce of the air,
> That could not cease to be."

These lines represent the positions these two entirely different birds have frequently occupied towards each

other in the poetry of Wordsworth. When he has thought of the thrush the linnet has crossed his mind, and when of the linnet, then there has been the inseparable thrush to contend with.

The song of the linnet, which has always appeared to me very commonplace, and save a few redeeming sweetly shrill notes, very inferior to that of other birds, has received from the pen of Wordsworth the highest praise he could have possibly attributed to any song. To understand the value of his encomium one needs to read his two poems, "Expostulation and Reply," and "The Tables Turned." These following verses disclose Wordsworth's true love of Nature. He is asked—

> "Where are your books? that light bequeathed
> To beings else forlorn and blind!
> Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed
> From dead men to their kind."

Wordsworth replies:—

> "Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife;
> Come, hear the woodland linnet.
> How sweet his music! on my life,
> There's more of wisdom in it."

If Wordsworth did not read the innumerable works of his colleagues, he read the one great, and yet uncompleted work, the endless pages, the volume without preface, introduction, or finish, unbound, unprinted, inexhaustible Book of Nature. He read this transcendent tome with care, every page he opened, and every line

became buried in his comprehensive mind, only again to resurrect and become part of everlasting verse. What wonder that he found nature's lines more interesting than the lines of Homer's Iliad or Aristocle's treatise on Rhetoric, or his nine books on Morals? What wonder that Wordsworth pored over the one great book written by Nature, to the disregard of the countless others penned by man, those wearisome and soul-aggravating volumes which rarely, if ever, satisfy literary thirst? Wordsworth's appreciation of bird melody is, moreover, here clearly discovered to the light, and his love of the linnet's song is distinctly shown. We are allowed, in fact, by this verse, to understand his thoughts when in after life he wrote—

"A linnet warbled from those lofty elms."

In the mating season, linnets, as a rule, repair to the thickest clumps of furze, from which the cocks sing almost incessantly. Their strain is commonly in a soft and low tone, and has some notes at this time of singularly trilling sweetness, that, at intervals of the greatest irregularity, mark the confused warbling which is the result of two or more rival performers, more bent upon showing off their own prowess than blending their voices in harmonious concert. I do not hesitate to say that this was the mock-harmony that Wordsworth heard at Dryburgh—

"Where with chiming Tweed
The lintwhites sing in chorus."

While one stands listening to this garble of notes, and watching the little songsters now feeding off the flax (*Linum*), and then flitting to the hemp (*Cannabis*), the two foods which have given them their names in several European languages—our own and the Latin among others — it is impossible to help being delighted with every movement and every note of our little kaleidoscopic birds. One moment it scolds in low and solemn voice, another it sings a merry ring, bursting, as it were, with laughter; and anon, as if too delighted with its liberty and power, it darts to rapidly satisfy some apparently instantaneous touch of hunger. Well may Wordsworth ask—

> "Who would check the happy feeling
> That inspires the linnet's song?"

## THE JAY.

It has been truly said that Wordsworth seems to know no more of the Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) than its name, but the writer who made the observation has allowed his pen to run very fast when he has further affirmed that the jay is a bird the poets have not liked, and do not like. A fact undeniable is that the jay has ever been exceedingly little noted by the poets, and where it has been considered, full advantage has not been taken of the many beauties which adorn the bird. But we possess no right to criticise this deficiency before we have inquired into the cause.

Examine the subject as I may, and I often have, I have only been able to arrive at the conclusion that the jay itself is not answerable for its absence from poetry, but that this absence is primarily caused by those who are generally the very first to cry out against the bards —the multitude of sporting naturalists, who are ever driving the beautiful birds farther and farther away from the eyes and ears of those who are best able to use them in literature. The bird has now become so rare, that it is unusual to find even its name in print.

So arboreal in its habits is the bird, so shy and wary, so retiring from anything like open country, that those who would see it must cautiously and noiselessly enter a coppice, and remain as if an inanimate object. Although it is true in the main that ripe cherries,

strawberries, plums, or peas, will tempt jays to make inroads into orchards and gardens *in the vicinity of coppices*, yet so thinned are their ranks, and so frightened by the guns which are ever pointed at them—if not to kill them as marauders or vermin, to slay them for their precious fishing feathers, which they alone possess—that it is rarely, if even the coppice be well stocked, the jays are ever venturesome enough to leave the thick coverts which afford them shelter and security.

He who would watch the habits of the jay must act cautiously and cat-like. He must enter the woods stealthily, for if the bird perceive him it will instantly shift to a thick bough, if such be near, or, if compelled to remain exposed, it will become, as Yarrell says, "motionless and silent-looking like a dead stump." In this cataleptic state it only can possess for the poet the amount of interest a well-wired and perfectly-stuffed specimen would possess to a naturalist.

The jay, if we wish to have a poetical picture of activity, must be seen by the poet immediately before it simulates death, or just after it relieves itself from its inanimate position. In a word, the poet must approach either noiselessly, and see the bird gesticulating, or, having disturbed it, he must go forward until he urges it to drop as though dead into the undergrowth beneath, from which it will most probably escape in some direction least expected. Another natural fact which debars the poets from noticing this bird, is its perfect quietness—save when a fox or cat appears—

during the breeding season, a quietness which renders the detection of its presence almost impossible; so that a pair of jays, or more, may take up their abode even in a moderately small wood or plantation, without their presence being suspected by any save the most attentive observer.

Is it not natural, then, when we think of the absolute labour which is needed to "interview" this bird at home, that the bards have more frequently noted its startled cry—its "screech," its "scream"? We cannot be surprised that instead of giving us a sketch of its coppice life the Lake poet wrote—

> "From Bruno's forest screams the affrighted jay."

I ask what further chance have the poets of watching this bird. They may notice it, I am aware, migrating in a slow, laborious way, or they may see it a speck in the distance, flying with an undulating motion and frequent flapping of the wings. They may see it flit from one tree to another like an arrow shot from Cupid's bow, or perchance, they may witness it clumsily hopping about the base of some oak. Moreover, if they care, they may contemplate the array of decomposing carcases, that utterly repulsive sight, at once the delight of the gamekeeper,*

* The jay has always been abhorred by the gamekeeper. In the reign of George II., an Act of Parliament was passed, empowering certain authorities to pay a reward of threepence per head for every slaughtered bird. Owing to the gamekeepers' dislike for anything new, they have ignorantly gone on slaying a bird which, if it does them some harm, also does them some good. Once I

and the destroyer of the charms of many a pleasing sylvan spot. The poets may examine these bodies, but if they and the reader will take my advice, they will, if they do not wish to be disgusted at the stupidity of their fellow-men, keep a long way from this most detestable of morgues.

Lastly, the poet may visit Greece and dine off jay—a wretched burnt morsel, served up in a deformed state, under his very eyes.

No English bird possesses better mocking faculties than the jay, but it is seldom we get the opportunity of listening to its powers. It will imitate the bleat of a lamb, the neigh of a horse, the mew of a cat, the bark of a dog, the wail of a kite or buzzard (if happily in this nineteenth century it can hear the keynote given), the hoot of an owl, the crow of a cock, the cackle of a hen, the song of a greenfinch, the human speech, the warblings of birds; and Bewick says: "We have heard one imitate the sound of a saw so exactly, that, though it was on Sunday, we could hardly be persuaded that there was not a carpenter at work in the house." Pleasant indeed, and great fun too, is it to listen to the two great rivals, the magpie and the jay, to the tangled babble of voices which arises, when, as Wordsworth says—

"The jay makes answer as the magpie chatters."

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asked a gamekeeper why he killed so many jays, and he answered me: "Well, you see, sir, they fly across the horses when the gentlemen come a-hunting, and are apt to scare them off." What an admirable excuse!

## THE MAGPIE.

BESIDES the notice which I have quoted just now from Wordsworth's poem on "Resolution and Independence," that pictures the Magpie (*Pica caudata*) and the jay holding a tête-à-tête together in chattering gibberish, the Lake poet has further mentioned this bird —one of our metallic beauties—in his poem entitled "The Idle Shepherd-boy, or Dungeon-Ghyll-Force." In this pastoral Wordsworth points to the joy and pride with which the magpie uses its mocking vocal organs :—

"The magpie chatters with delight."

## THE RAVEN.

WHO having read in his childhood that most dire of Dickens's novels, which takes its title from its half-fledged hero Barnaby Rudge, will forget in his older days the full-feathered, impish, complementary hero, "Grip," the raven. We are told by our most illustrious novelist that Grip is a compound of two great originals of whom Dickens had been, at different times, the proud possessor. Because Mr. Waterton opined that ravens were becoming gradually extinct in England, Dickens in these words offers a remark about his: "The first was in the bloom of his youth, when he was discovered in a modest retirement in London, by a friend of mine, and given to me. He had from the first, as Sir Hugh Evans says of Anne Page, 'good gifts,' which he improved by study and attention, in a most exemplary manner. He slept in a stable—generally on horseback—and so terrified a Newfoundland dog by his preternatural sagacity that he has been known, by the mere superiority of his genius, to walk off unmolested with the dog's dinner, from before his face. He was rapidly rising in acquirements and virtues, when, in an evil

hour, his stable was newly painted. He observed the workmen closely, saw that they were careful of the paint, and eagerly burned to possess it. On their going to dinner, he ate up all they had left behind, consisting of a pound or two of white lead; and this youthful indiscretion terminated in death. While I was yet inconsolable for his loss, another friend of mine in Yorkshire discovered an older and more gifted raven at a village public-house, which he prevailed upon the landlord to part with for a consideration, and sent up to me. The first act of this sage was to administer to the effects of his predecessor, by disinterring all the cheese and half pence he had buried in the garden—a work of immense labour and research, to which he devoted all the energies of his mind. When he had achieved this task, he applied himself to the acquisition of stable language, in which he soon became such an adept, that he would perch outside my window and drive imaginary horses with great skill all day. Perhaps even I never saw him at his best, for his former master sent his duty with him, 'and if I wished the bird to come out very strong, would I show him a drunken man,' which I never did, having unfortunately none but sober people at hand. But I could hardly have respected him more, whatever the stimulating influence of this sight might have been. He had not the least respect, I am sorry to say, for me in return, or for anybody but the cook; to whom he was attached, but only, I fear, as a policeman might have been. Once I met him unexpectedly, about half a mile off,

walking down the middle of the public street, attended by a pretty large crowd, and spontaneously exhibiting the whole of his accomplishments. His gravity under those trying circumstances I never can forget, nor the extraordinary gallantry with which, refusing to be brought home, he defended himself behind a pump, until overpowered by numbers. It may have been that he was too bright a genius to live long, or it may have been that he took some pernicious substance into his bill, and thence into his maw—which is not improbable, seeing that he new-pointed the greater part of the garden wall by digging out the mortar, broke countless squares of glass by scraping away the putty all round the frames, and tore up and swallowed, in splinters, the greater part of a wooden staircase of six steps and a landing—but after some three years he too was taken ill, and died before the kitchen fire. He kept his eye to the last upon the meat as it roasted, and suddenly turned over on his back with a sepulchral cry of 'Cuckoo!' After this mournful deprivation I was, for a long time, ravenless. The kindness of another friend at length provided me with another raven; but he is not a genius. He leads the life of a hermit, in my little orchard, on the summit of Shakespeare's Gad's Hill; he has no relish for society; he gives no evidence of ever cultivating his mind; and he has picked up nothing but meat since I have known him, except the faculty of barking like a dog."

These ravens, birds very different from "Grip," in-

spired Dickens with the idea of making a croaking raven, an obscene bird, the companion to the three-and-twenty year old, red-haired, tawdry-laced, wan and haggard, insane, almost unearthly hero of his book, which so graphically and forcibly deals with those shameful tumults known as the Gordon riots, that reflect indelible disgrace upon the times in which they occurred. What position of power this raven holds in the novel he who has carefully read Dickens's "Barnaby Rudge" alone can say. From the time Grip introduces himself by vulgarly shouting, "Halloa, halloa, halloa! Bow, wow, wow. What's the matter here! Halloa!" in the cottage where the sick Edward Chester reclines in a chair, to the time he exclaims with rapture, "I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a devil," a year after the release of his master from Newgate, Dickens makes Grip, in that extraordinary way which is alone his own, the entertainer, the Pistol, Nym, and Bardolph of his work.

But there is another point, a point which is seldom noticed, which I would lay before the reader's judgment. Dickens has introduced a raven—a bird of ill-omen—into a book which deals almost, it might be said, wholly with death. Yarrell has said, "Among British birds there is none able to imitate the varied sounds of the human voice more successfully than the raven, and many instances are known of its talking with a distinctness of articulation and accuracy of tone that are almost perfect, while it will occasionally utters phrases that by their accidental aptness are positively startling to the hearer, and

produces an effect not to be exaggerated even in *fiction*." Yet I have heard it objected that as a talker Grip is overdrawn. Let this be as it may—and I emphatically deny the accusation—no such allegation can be sustained by any critic, let it be whom it will, against Grip's character as a presager of death.

Grip plays a prominent part in a book which narrates the history of a time when fire and smoke and a rabble's unappeasable and maniac rage is not the worst spectacle. Grip travels about on the back of an idiot, foreboding death as superstition would lead us to believe, when, as Dickens says :—" The gutters of the street, and every crack and fissure in the stones, ran with scorching spirit, which, being dammed up by busy hands, overflowed the road and pavement, and formed a great pool in which the people dropped down dead by dozens. They lay in heaps all round this fearful pond, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, women with children in their arms and babies at their breasts, and drank until they died. While some stooped with their lips to the brink and never raised their heads again, others sprang up from their fiery draught and danced, half in a mad triumph, and half in the agony of suffocation, until they fell and steeped their corpses in the liquor that had killed them. Nor was even this the worst or most appalling kind of death that happened on this fatal night. From the burning cellars, where they drank out of hats, pails, buckets, tubs, and shoes, some men were drawn, alive, but all alight from head to foot; who, in

their unendurable anguish and suffering, making for anything that had the look of water, rolled, hissing, in this hideous lake, and splashed up liquid fire which lapped in all it met with as it ran along the surface, and neither spared the living nor the dead. On this last night of the great riots—for the last night it was—the wretched victims of a senseless outcry became themselves the dust and ashes of the flames they had kindled, and strewed the public streets of London."

The raven has always been considered a bird of ill-omen. If it does not immediately presage death its presence brings infection. The bird has never been liked, and to be regarded with awe, if not superstitious reverence, has ever been its lot. We imagine it fortells death, and we have got this idea I believe firmly fixed in our heads because it follows, or more correctly speaking, did follow, armies under the expectation of finding dead bodies to *raven* on; further, we play upon our imaginations until we arrive at a notion, a mere offshoot, that the bird is infectious, because pestilence kills as rapidly as the sword. Thus it is poetically, Gay says:—

> "The boding raven on her cottage sat
> And with hoarse croakings warned us of our fate."

But Marlowe prefers the second theory, that infection is the raven's principal card.

> "Like the sad-presaging raven that tolls
> The sick man's passport in her hollow beak,
> And in the shadow of the silent night
> Does shake contagion from her sable wings."

Jovianus Pontanus speaks of two skirmishes between ravens and kites near Beneventum, which prognosticated a great battle, consequently great death. Nicetas speaks of a skirmish between crows and ravens as presaging the irruption of the Scythians into Thrace. Likewise he tells us that his friend Mr. Draper, in the flower of his age and robust health, knew he was at the point of death, because two ravens flew into his chamber. Cicero, we remember, was forewarned of his death by the fluttering of ravens, and Macaulay relates the legend that a raven entered the chamber of the great orator the very day of his murder and pulled the clothes off his bed.

Shakespeare has referred to the raven several times as a bird of ill-omen. In the fifth scene of the first act in *Macbeth* we find an effective allusion. An attendant enters the chamber of Lady Macbeth to announce—

"The king comes here to-night.
*Lady M.* Thou'rt mad to say it!
Is not thy master with him? who, were't so,
Would have informed for preparation.
*Attend.* So please you, it is true:—our thane is coming;
One of my fellows had the speed of him:
Who, almost dead for breath, had scarcely more
Than would make up his message.
*Lady M.* Give him tending:
He brings great news. [*Exit Attendant.*
The raven is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements."

Johnson lucidly explains the meaning of this sentence by remarking—"The messenger, says the servant, had

hardly breath to make up his message, to which the lady answers mentally, that he may well want breath; such a message would add hoarseness to the raven. That even the bird whose harsh voice is accustomed to predict calamities, could not croak the entrance of Duncan but in a note of unwonted harshness."

Coming down more toward our own time, who having read can forget Edgar Allen Poe's "Raven"? Who can forget that austere mono-vocalist? which ever repeats the poet's alternating heptameter catalectic and tetrameter catalectic refrain "Never more." Who will forget that climax stanza?—

"'Prophet,' said I, 'thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that heaven that bends above us—by the God we both adore—
Tell this soul with sorrow laden, if, within the distant aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore!'
Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.'"

Sir Walter Scott has made his raven the omen of immediate misery and subsequent death. We must all remember that sorrowful scene witnessed by the fatal Mermaiden's Well. Edgar Ravenswood and Lucy Ashton have just broken betwixt them the thin, broad piece of gold which Alice—blind Alice—has refused to receive from the hero of the "Bride of Lammermoor," when a bird, a raven, drops dead at the feet of the heroine, staining with its blood her dress.

It would be no difficult task to go on relating many more passages, both from prose and poetry, referring to the raven (*Corvus corax*) as a bird of ill-omen, but having gone so far it is time I returned to my text, to Wordsworth, who, in a single line, tells us—

"Blithe ravens croak of death."*

Again, ravens bode death by famine. When a flock of ravens forsake the woods we may look for famine, and thus mortality, "because ravens bear the characters of Saturn, the author of calamities, and have a very early perception of the bad disposition of that planet." So true was this believed to be that an ancient wrote—"As if the great god Jupiter had nothing else to doe but to dryve about jacke-dawes and ravens." Lastly, like many other birds, ravens indicate foul weather by their cries; yet this has been indignantly answered thus: "It is ful unleful to believe that God sheweth his prevy counsayle to crowes, as Isidore sayeth."

In days gone by this prophesying was rather a good thing for the raven, for people treated the bird with wonderful reverence; but now the tables are turned, man is to be duped by superstition no longer, and the raven suffers, where a little while ago he rejoiced. It has always appeared to me to be hard on the raven that it should have to bear the brunt of being a vaticinator of

* Wordsworth, in his poem, "The Oak and the Broom," has a quotation which makes the raven croak immediately before the death of an oak-tree.

bad luck. Its ebon blackness adapts the bird to its remarkable position in a way no other hue could, and its relish for carrion, if we may regard it as a depraved taste, seems only a fit assimilation of inward and outward habit. Its thoughtless way of reposing on such weird things as German stone gibbets, and christening those decidedly ghastly objects Rabensteine (Ravenstone*), has not bettered its rank in the fellowship of birds, nor has it improved man's esteem for it. This unearthly habit and its alleged power to prognosticate ill are decidedly against the bird ever becoming a favourite, be the raven necromantic or no.

This is made the harder to bear because at one time, we are told, ravens were as white as swans, and not inferior in size. The change took place because, on an unhappy occasion, a raven told Apollo—who up to this time had cultivated it as a favourite—that Coronis, a Thessalian nymph whom he passionately loved, was faithless. The god shot the nymph with his dart, but hating the tell-tale bird—

> "He blacked the raven o'er,
> And bid him prate in his white plumes no more."†

Another edition of this legend runs thus: "The raven was the favourite bird of Apollo, being celebrated for its

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* "Do you think
I'll honour you so much as save your throat
From the *ravenstone*, by choking you myself?"—*Byron.*

† Addison, "Translation of Ovid."

sweet song and snowy white plumage. Part of its duty was to bring water for its master from the fountain of Hippocrene. One day, instead of doing its duty, the bird amused itself in the garden, and at last fell asleep. Fearful when it awoke that it should be punished for its carelessness, the raven snatched up a snake, killed it, and brought it to Apollo, saying that the serpent had disputed the passage to the fountain, and that, after a long fight, it had killed it. Apollo, angry with the bird for having told a lie, drove it from his presence, and as it fled its musical voice turned into a harsh croak, and its plumage became black.

"'Liar!' exclaimed the god,
The Python-killer, as from his keen eye
The lightning darted, 'me wouldst thou deceive
With such a wretched tale! Hence, hence! begone!
Black as thy falsehood fly through shuddering air,
A bird of lonely night! Dumb be thy voice
Of sweetest melody; henceforth thy cry
Tell but of woes and horrors, a wild shriek
Of darkness and dismay.'"

*Knight's Quarterly Magazine.*

In Christian art the raven is immortal. It is the first bird specifically mentioned in the Bible. Noah trusted its sagacity when he sent it forth out of the ark to seek for dry land; it was selected as the most intelligent of the feathered company, and no bird, save, perhaps, the eagle or albatross, could have so adequately sustained the dignity of its proud position. When it gained its liberty it traversed to and fro on the infinite expanse of the celestial dome, exhibiting its mighty powers of

self-reliance and independence. Unlike the frightened dove, it soared away far beyond the reach of human eye, never to return again to the ark.

The ravens fed Elijah: they are the birds of Isaiah. St. Oswald holds in his hand a raven with a ring in its mouth; St. Benedict has a raven at his feet; St. Paul, the hermit, is drawn with a raven bringing him a loaf of bread; and the bird's punctual return to its roosting-place told the Jews, so say the Talmudists, on a dull, murky day, when the course of the sun could not be traced, the period during which certain religious laws had to be performed. Moreover, let us not be so ungenerous as to forget for a moment Owain's* three hundred irresistible ravens, or the German saying, "Keine krähe hackt der anderen die augen aus," † which shows that one raven lives on neighbourly terms with another.

Wordsworth has penned one passage in which he calls the raven "Danish"—

> "A dark plume fetch me from yon blasted yew,
> Perched on whose top the Danish raven croaks."

In some stanzas designed to introduce a ballad upon the story of a Danish prince who had fled from battle, and for the sake of the valuables about him was murdered by the inhabitant of a cottage in which he had taken refuge, Wordsworth has these two lines—

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* This legend is contradictory; some say these ravens were warriors who on their shields bore this device.

† One raven will not pluck another's eyes out.

"A regal vest of fur he wears,
In colour like a raven's wing."

This is a rather original description of a ghost's costume. We can hardly picture a black ghost. But a raven-coloured gown was an appropriate vestment for a murdered Danish prince to haunt the valley in which the crime was committed.

The "Fatal Raven," or "The Messenger from Valhalla," was consecrated to Odin, the Danish war-god, and it was the emblem on the Vikings' standard. This standard was called "Landeyda" (the desolation of the country), and miraculous powers were attributed to it. Odin had this symbol embroidered in one noontide by the daughters of Regner Lodbrok, the son of the dauntless Sigurd, who chanted his death-song (the Krakamal) while being stung to death in a horrible pit filled with poisonous serpents, which, through a union with Gudrun, brought about by the influence of a love-potion, was his miserable end. If the Danish arms were destined to be defeated, the embroidered raven hung his head and drooped his wings; but if victory was to be the lot of the Danes, then did the bird, standing erect and soaring, invite the warriors to follow. So interesting is this Scandinavian mythology, so wondrous the associates of this ancient war-god, their chief, so unparalleled everything related to the son of Fridulph, so stupendous the surroundings of this dreadful banner, that a book might be written entirely bestowed on this terrible sign and its more terrible necromantic prophecies. But besides this woven bird,

Odin had two ravens of the very blackest hue on his mighty shoulders, Huginn (mind) was the name given to the one, and Muninn (memory) to the other. What a strange sight it must have been to see the great Odin going forth to battle with all his "tail on"! In his hall, in the specious Einherian, he would leave his wife, Frigga, the Juno of Valhalla, and his son, the god of peace, Balder, who in later days was killed by the blind war-god, Höder. But the bloodthirsty Thor would leave his Thrudvangr, and with his uncle Ve, he who, with two other deities, took part in the creation of the world, on the one hand, and his uncle Vili, the great archer, on the other, would follow the god's steed, eight-legged Sleipner, which could carry his master over sea as well as land. Following in a "jog-trot" style we can picture the wolves Geri and Freki, and far away, lurking with ever-watchful eye, is a third wolf, Fenris, who is to ultimately have the proud position of swallowing up the hero. And the hero, the mighty Odin himself, must have been a terrifying frontispiece of the band with his two ravens perched on either shoulder, his prolific ring, Draupner, which every ninth night dropped eight other rings of equal value, on his finger, and his all-fatal spear, Gungner, which never failed to hit a mark aimed at, in his powerful grasp. Veritably it must have been a tremendous sight, one well selected to journey about with the bird of ill-omen as its standard.

Besides the two references I have quoted, the pages of Wordsworth are rich with notices of—

"The raven, black and sleek,
With shining claw and sharpened beak."*

Ravens evidently pair for life, and yet may rarely be seen flying in couples across tbe less cultivated portions of this isle. It has been pointed out that when one of a pair dies the survivor speedily replaces the loss; such is seldom the case to-day. When one bird dies—after perhaps a happy life of one hundred years—the remainder exists alone, and if both die their loss is scarcely ever replaced by the arrival of newcomers.

Wordsworth in his poem "The Oak and the Broom" has the following reference to a pair of birds plighting their troth :—

"But in the branches of the oak
Two ravens now began to croak
Their nuptial song, a gladsome air."

There was a time, and that not so long ago, when nearly every district, even in the midland counties, had its pair, well known by all the folk around; as well known, and almost as much distrusted as was the—

"Oak whose roots by moontide dew were damped
And on whose forehead inaccessible
The raven lodged in safety."

Many "raven's trees" sprinkled the earth when man was less learned and more superstitious, but now they are all suffering the fate of that one, the great naturalist White of Selborne speaks so pathetically and poetically about, when he says, "The fatal day arrived in

* Cook, "Birds."

which the wood was to be levelled. It was in the month of February when these birds usually sit. The saw was applied to the butt, the wedges were inserted into the opening—the woods echoed to the heavy blow of the butte or mall or mallet, the tree nodded to its fall, but still the dam sat on. At last, when it gave way, the bird was flung from her nest; and, though her parental affection deserved a better fate, was whipped down by the twigs, which brought her dead to the ground."

But the tallest tree of the neighbourhood is not always chosen as either a building place or a roosting place. High rocks, where danger may be seen and often avoided, are, or shall I say were, selected. Accordingly Wordsworth speaks of two brothers playing—

"Like two young ravens on the crags."

Again he writes:—

"The crags repeat the raven's croak
In sympathy austere."

Once more he says:—

"The 'abrupt abyss,'
Where ravens spread their plumy vans, at ease!"

Over and above he speaks of the raven loving—

"Her haven
In the bosom of the cliff."

In the poem, "The Idle Shepherd Boy, or Dungeon-Ghyll-Force," we find this account of the offspring leaving the nest:—

"The mountain raven's youngling brood
Have left the mother and the nest,
And they go rambling east and west,
In search of their own food;
Or through the glittering vapours dart
In very wantonness of heart."

This is a pretty study, but one scarcely calculated to satisfy the true ornithologist. While in the nest the wants of the nestlings are carefully attended to by both parents, and for a week or two after the progeny follow their dam about, the male bird bearing company. When the day arrives though, when the young are fully able to provide for themselves, they are invariably driven from the home in which they were reared and forced to seek a new abode or to become wandering vagrants.

The raven's carcase-eating predisposition has not remained unnoticed by the Lake poet. He states:—

"A sharp May storm
Will come with loads of January snow,
And in one night send twenty score of sheep
To feed the ravens."

Yarrell has spoken of the raven as being bold and sagacious, with a quick eye, and, possibly, a keen sense of smell. The naturalist goes on to say, "It must have been the familiar follower of the prehistoric hunter and fisher, as, where it now exists, it is of their successors, feasting on the refuse of their spoil and hardly molested by them; but it must always have been an object of distrust, or something stronger, to herdsmen. No sooner

does an animal betray any signs of weakness than the raven is on the watch for the opportunity, and cautiously awaiting the prostration of its victim, it begins its attack on the eye, especially when the creature be large and still alive, after which, applying itself to the perinæum, it proceeds gradually to draw out the intestines, until the muscles of the eviscerated carcase alone are left to furnish a future meal." Though the raven is not entirely dependent upon the carrion which falls in its way, being a hunter after the type of the *Accipitres*, yet lambs have good reason to dread the bird's presence, for they appear to be a particularly favourite dish with them, and Wordsworth has good cause for penning such lines as—

> "Here thou needest not dread the Raven in the sky,
> Night and day thou art safe, our cottage is hard by."

Nor has the raven's hoarse croak, that startling, unearthly, piercing croak, been neglected by the poet. One of his very finest passages is devoted to this weird voice—more fit for hell than earth, better fitted to call souls to Gehenna than to sing a nuptial song! Thus does Wordsworth speak of the ghastly boom :—

> "Often, at the hour
> When issue forth the first pale stars, is heard,
> Within the circuit of this fabric huge,
> One voice, the solitary raven, flying
> Athwart the concave of the dark-blue dome,
> Unseen, perchance above all power of sight,
> An iron knell! with echoes from afar
> Faint and still fainter, as the cry, with which
> The wanderer accompanies her flight

Through the calm region, fades upon the ear,
Diminishing by distance till it seemed
To expire, yet from the abyss is caught again
And yet again recovered!"

What a glorious picture! Who could paint thus glowingly in such words were he not in the midst of Nature? Many poets, Thomson, Shelley, Montgomery not omitted, have told of the raven as a tempest-loving creature, as a bird if not actually living in the raging storm, flying about in the gloom preceding the tempest anxiously awaiting the coming winds and rain, for I take the word storm to mean a combination of all the more tempestuous elements thrashed into violence by the winds. Wordsworth, while he writes of the bird as a gamboller on the wind, accurately fixes the raven's likes and dislikes. Though he pictured the bird enjoying the breezes he points out that its tastes are not single. In his song, "The Wandering Jew," he indites:—

"If in windy days the raven
Gambols like a dancing skiff,
Not the less she loves her haven
In the bosom of the cliff."

In a section of the "Excursion" the poet writes:—

"The Solitary lifted tow'rd the hills
A kindling eye; poetic feelings rushed
Into my bosom, whence these words broke forth:
'Oh! what a joy it were, in vigorous health,
To have a body (this our vital frame
With shrinking sensibility endued,
And all the nice regards of flesh and blood),
And to the elements surrender it
As if it were a spirit!' How divine,
The liberty, for frail, for mortal man

To roam at large among unpeopled glens
And mountainous retirements, only trod
By devious footsteps: regions consecrate
To oldest time! and, reckless of *the storm*
*That keeps the raven quiet in her nest,*
Be as a presence or a motion, one
Among the many there."

Fond may the raven be of her cliff, but man has never yet wantonly ventured into the storm that binds the raven fast at home. His imagination has alone been his presence, it has ever acted deputy for his body. Rare indeed is it tempestuous enough to stop the raven's flight. The bird of ill-omen may be found steadily pressing itself against a contrary wind like Rider Haggard's "Jess." Aye slowly progressing against the opposing elements the raven may be seen even in such a storm as that imagined and so graphically described by Cullen Bryant:—

"But who shall bide thy tempest? who shall face
The blast that wakes the fury of the sea?
O God! Thy justice makes the world turn pale,
When on the armed fleet, that royally
Bears down the surges, carrying war to smite
Some city or invade some thoughtless realm,
Descends the fierce tornado. The vast hulks
Are whirled like chaff upon the waves; the sails
Fly, rent like webs of gossamer; the masts
Are snapped asunder; downward from the decks,
Downward, are slung into the fathomless gulf.
Their cruel engines, and their hosts, arrayed
In trappings of the battle-field, are whelmed
By whirlpools, or dashed dead upon the rocks.
Then stand the nations still with awe, and pause
A moment from the bloody work of war."

## THE HOODED CROW.

LEAVING the raven to his traditional lot of prophesying coming death, whether congenial or not, I will not further inquire, I find Wordsworth has one reference to the Royston, Grey, or Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*), or the Black Crow (*Corvus corone*)—

> "As lonely . . . . as a crow on the sands."

Most likely this line refers to the hooded crow, which is perhaps more commonly to be seen dotted here and there about the dreary sands which form our foreshores of the silent highway of the nations. It may be very frequently seen, more frequently, in fact, than its brother the common carrion-eating crow. Nevertheless, this quotation may mean the common black crow, but since these two birds live together, breed together indiscriminately, and their offspring sometimes combine the characters of both parents, this notice, were the probabilities as weighty on the one side as on the other, would certainly attach itself to either the dark English bird or its lighter Scandinavian cousin.

## THE ROOK.

THE Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) has not been left unnoticed by Wordsworth. The bird has been recognised to me in a very unsatisfactory manner, and I cannot help asking myself why the great limner in verse of the grandest scenery this island possesses has not troubled more about these interesting gregarious fowls —our gardeners of the open country—than just to make such a commonplace, everyday remark as—

"The cawing rooks."

Why Wordsworth has so abruptly dismissed the sociable rook, which loves the immediate vicinity of the habitations of man so dearly that records are extant of ancient settlements being deserted when the neighbouring dwelling has been pulled down, or even abandoned as a place of human abode, has puzzled me much. The bird's meritorious sagacity should have stood it in better stead, for it is said rooks are so knowing that they will not build in a tree which is likely to suffer the effects of a woodman's axe. Then the uncertainties of the weather are known to them, for they strengthen their nests against a coming gale of

wind. They are reported to have a marvellous acquaintance with human affairs, manifested by a change of abode on the death or arrival of a proprietor who has molested or favoured them.*

Then again the rooks have had their colonies in the very midst of London, and have furnished Goldsmith, by living in the Temple Gardens, with opportunities of observing their "policy." They are—or ought to be — the farmer's delight, for without injuring his crops, they detect, in a way unknown to man, and destroy grubs, which if once allowed to attain maturity and propagate their kind, would work incalculable damage. Why Wordsworth has not introduced the bird more frequently into his lines one cannot state; wonder and dissatisfaction may be felt, but no right can be established by which I, or any one else, may cavil at his caprice, neglect, or disregard of a denizen of the woods he must have seen continually, and probably in vast numbers, as he wandered on his solitary rounds.

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* In 1824 the late Lord Home was desirous of destroying a rookery near Coldstream, and, after three years, effected his purpose. During the remainder of his life not a single rook's nest was built on the property, but in 1842, the first spring after his death, the birds returned, not, indeed, to their former haunts, but to some old trees within a mile of the place. A similar thing happened at Douglas Castle. The rooks had been driven away in 1841. In 1857 the present Lord Home went to live there, and in the following year they returned to their old quarters.

*Yarrell.*

## THE SKYLARK.

IN the literature of this country the Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) unquestionably holds the foremost place of any bird. The prevalence of the species and the way in which it thrusts itself into observation have encouraged nearly every British poet or poetaster to pen an ode or allude in some manner or other to either its habits, or, more frequently, to its marvellous power of song; furthermore this inspiration has fired many of our grandest prose writers, only to make them enshrine the bird in triumphant passages of beautiful and at the same time expressive words.

"The Lark, that terra-lirra chants"

of Shakespeare; Mackay's—

"Lark that sings in Heaven's blue cope,
A thing too happy ev'n to hope,"

and Sayage's

"Low-laid Lark,"

has by its cheerful and exhilarating song earned for itself a place in letters that might make Philomela grieve for more than the loss of her only son Itylus, or Progne feel dissatisfied with the elegant beauty of her perfect wings.

The skylark holds an elevated place in poetry no

other bird can soar to, and in prose it is ever introduced to complete and perfect pictures of happy tranquillity, besides transcendental activity and sprightly fruition. In our nurseries we are taught from morals drawn from the lark. Its exemplary early rising—the advantages of which Lamb so characteristically questions—is forced down our throats as well, and nearly as often, as brimstone and treacle. Its soaring capabilities and incessant gayness under trying circumstances, such as the labour of nidification and incubation, teach us while young to do anything but love the bird's—

"Sweet warbling on the wing,"

which—

"Salutes the gay return of spring."

Long before we are able to wander about the world the lark has evolved, thanks principally if not wholly to the pointed doctrines which are indefatigably modelled from doubtful poets, into one of those full-orbed impossibilities the instrument of the attendant, the abhorrence of the attended. In our childhood we have already been taught to do what Wordsworth would teach us to do to-day—

"Rise with the lark."

Larks are the angels of the *avi-fauna* of the world. They send their delicious, ebullient song from earth to assist the heavenly choir. They hover between the world of perpetual darkness and the world of eternal light. They chant a hymn fitted for both saints and

sinners. They rise from the earth showering down exultant praise, they fall to earth leaving a strain of wondrous melody to float upon the air—

> "To the Islands of the Blessed,
> To the Kingdom of Ponemah!
> To the land of the Hereafter." *

In a wild state Shakespeare's "ploughman's clock" and "Herald of the Morn" chants for at least eight months out of the twelve. During these periods it rises ere the morning breaks, on quivering wing, almost perpendicularly, singing as it mounts. Without once stopping it gains an extraordinary elevation, higher than the eye can reach, and here stationary it drops—nay, casts down—its joyous notes to those beneath. It descends singing, and its downward course vibrates with hallowed sound. Occasionally the male sings while standing near his mate. Sometimes again, as if tired of wing but not of throat, he sits upon a bush and fills the surrounding air with divine music of overflowing gladness. The lark's life is a song of gladness.

Wordsworth has made frequent allusions to the early rising of this bird:—

> "Lark of the dawn."—*Liberty.*

> "The Lark
> Springs from the ground the morn to gratulate."
> *Waldenses: Ecclesiastical Sketches.*

> "As vigorous as a Lark at break of day."
> *To the Supreme Being: Miscellaneous Sonnets.*

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* Longfellow: "Hiawatha."

But Wordsworth seems to have no belief in the fact that the lark rises often, at least as Chaucer tells us, two hours before the day, and—

> "Springs from the grassy lea, or rustling corn,
> Towers thro' dull night, and wakes the coming morn." *

Though he speaks of the lark being vigorous at the break of day, he penned in a blank leaf of Macpherson's "Ossian":—

> "Musæus, stationed with his lyre
> Supreme among the Elysian quire,
> Is, for the dwellers upon earth,
> Mute as a lark ere morning's birth."

Again the poet of the Lakes actually points out, not in order to disparage Shakespeare's writing, but rather in order to render tribute, that—

> "That darling bard
> Who told of Juliet and her Romeo,"

also told of the—

> "Lark's note heard before its time."

Most likely Wordsworth here refers to that well-known passage to be found in "Venus and Adonis":

> "Lo, here the gentle lark, weary of rest,
> From his moist cabinet mounts up on high,
> *And wakes the morning*, from whose silver breast
> The sun ariseth in his majesty;"

or to his lines to be found in *Troilus and Cressida*—

> "The busy day,
> *Waked by the lark*, hath rous'd the ribald crows."

It is almost incredible that Wordsworth should miss—

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* Wilson: "Morning."

shall I say disbelieve?—this well-accepted fact, a fact which the majority of poets have enthusiastically recognised. This is the more surprising when we remember how universally this point is accepted into poetry. Fletcher's lark—

"Awakes the drowsie light."

Thomson's—

"Up springs . . . .
Shrill voiced and loud . . . .
Ere yet the shadows fly, he mounted sings
Amid the dawning clouds, and from their haunts
Calls up the tuneful nations."

Burns's—

"'Tween light and dark
Blithe waukens."

Cornwall tells of a mateless lark, which—

"Call'd forth the dawn;"

Cunningham speaks of a lark which—

"To meet the dawn, soars beyond the shepherd's sight."

Cowper makes his lark just clear the margin, and do the proper thing—

"The innocent are gay—the lark is gay
That dries his feathers, saturate with dew,
Beneath the rosy cloud, while yet the beams
Of day-spring overshoot his humble nest."

But the great writer of "Paradise Lost" has written the criterion verse—

"To hear the lark begin his flight,
And singing startle the dull night;
From his watch-tower in the skies,
Till the dappled dawn doth rise."

In the face of all these quotations, *which are based upon fact*, one cannot but allow the truth of Wordsworth's statement—

> "The blackbird in the summer trees,
> The lark upon the hill,
> Let loose their carols when they please,
> Are quiet when they will."

We learn from Mrs. Hemans that the lark—

> "Rests not on the leafy spray
> To warble his exulting lay,
> But high above the morning cloud
> Mounts in triumphant freedom proud,
> And swells, when nearest to the sky,
> His notes of sweetest ecstasy."

Again we are told by Leyden—

> "The towering lark ascends on pinions strong,
> Amd as she mounts improves the varying song;
> Sweeter and sweeter modulates the sound,
> Till song and songster are in ether drown'd."

So diverse, though, are the heights from which the lark sings, and so innumerable the degrees mentioned by the bards, that it is impossible to accurately calculate either the real or imaginary distance from the earth at which the lark stops to chant. The bird's name *Sky*lark tells its history as a soarer into the blue expanse of the heavens, and Burns, Keats, Hurdis, Barry, Mackay, and other well-known poets, have sung of the bird as being either "of the sky baptized," or "sprinkling music from the sky." Some poets have written of the lark like Cornwall, as a bird that pours

its song into the sun; while others again, not content, have agreed with Keats that the lark was lost in the "well-wooing sun." I must admit that in this respect I am rather partial to those poets who, regardless of effect, have kept the lark down a little, made it more an atmospheric songster. I prefer Scott's—

"Laverock whistling from the clouds;"*

his

"Lark's blithe carol from the clouds;"

and Mackay's lark

"On the fringe of the cloud,"

to Hood's lark that

"Soars upwards and is gone;
Turning a spirit as he nears the sky."

It is true that Wordsworth is a little careless where he places his lark. Indeed, so varied are his heights that his lines touching this subject might well be selected as capable of illustrating, in the individual poet, the hundred and one divers pitches of the bird mentioned by the poets as a class. In his poem on "Resolution and Independence," Wordsworth—

"Heard the skylark warbling in the sky."

Again he writes—

"O'er wide plains whereon the sky distils
Her Lark's loved warblings."

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* Scott has another passage though which reads:—

"Invisible in the fleckled sky
The lark sent down her revelry."

In "A Fragment" Wordsworth says—

"In clouds above, the lark is heard."

And in his poem "A Warning," he pens the words—

"The warbling Lark intent to shroud
His head in sunbeams or a bowery cloud."

Now as a scientific fact the lark only soars for about fifteen minutes, therefore the poets would not have been at least *farther* from the mark had they been content to speak indefinitely as Scott did, when he wrote—

"In the mid-air sings the lark,"

or as Wordsworth did when he said—

"Blithe as the lark on sun-gilt wing
High poised."

But Wordsworth even pitches his lark's flight too low, a very uncommon mistake! He writes—

"If touched by him
The inglorious foot-ball mounted to the pitch
Of the Lark's flight."

This is a pretty simile, but one unfortunately more poetic than correct.

It is needless for me to say that plagiarism rages amongst the poets in a degree little less fierce than what it does amongst schoolboys. Let a poet produce a good original text, and it will be immediately copied by every poetry writer who shall follow. What wonder then that in a hundred different readings we discover that great, probably some would be inclined to say that greatest of all, poet's words—

"Hark! hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings,
And Phœbus 'gins arise,
His steeds to water at those springs
On chalic'd flowers that lies;
And winking May-buds begin
To ope their golden eyes;
With everything that pretty is,
My lady sweet, arise,
Arise, arise." *

As regards the first line of this verse I cannot claim for Wordsworth an exceptional place in this matter of plagiarism, little as ordinarily he is given to inserting in his own writings the words of others. We only read a repetition of Shakespeare's words in his lines—

"The soaring Lark is blest as proud
When at Heaven's gate she sings."

As the nightingale is called the "bird of eve" so has the lark been named the "bird of dawn." "Beauty," says Poe in his essay on the Philosophy of Composition, "of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. *Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all poetical tones.*" How ready man is to accept this may be easily seen by his greedy love of those novels which tell of breaking hearts, of forbidden love, or recount some mysterious plot, which having placed the heroine in a terrible situation, only unravels and clears up in the last chapter but one. Surely this is an abnormal, not a normal, taste. The nightingale's nocturnal song is more romantic, more

* *Cymbeline*, Act ii., Sc. 3.

tear-inspiring than the song that issues from the lark. One hears it generally rendered at a more romantic hour, and under more romantic circumstances, but it is not more beautiful than that song of glorious praise which is the lark's. Listen to the one song that tells a melancholy tale, then listen to the other which chants nothing but indefinite joy! The nightingale may mourn the closing of the day, and do this in a form no other bird could, but the lark equally as ably welcomes the sunshine, which dispels the glistening dewdrops. What then is more enchantingly beautiful than the glee which gushes from the throat of that small brown bird, the speck in the dome of the heavens which, as it ever soars upwards towards the kingdom of its Maker, teaches us our first daily duty, gratitude to the Creator who gives us life and permits us to enjoy it!

> "Rise with the lark! your matins shall obtain
> Grace, be their composition what it may,
> If but with hers performed."
>
> *The Excursion.*

Wordsworth's "Gay Lark of Hope" has no power to produce melancholy thoughts in man. Although—

> "Fancy, who leads the pastimes of the glad,
> Full oft is pleased a wayward dart to throw:
> Sending sad shadows after things not sad,
> Peopling the harmless fields with signs of woe;
> Beneath her sway, a simple forest cry,
> Becomes an echo of man's misery.
> But ne'er could fancy bend the buoyant lark
> To melancholy service—hark! oh hark!

"The daisy sleeps upon the dewy lawn,
Not lifted yet the head that evening bowed;
But he is risen, a later star of dawn,
Glittering and twinkling near yon rosy cloud;
Bright gem instinct with music, vocal spark:
The happiest bird that sprang out of the Ark!

"Hail, blest above all kinds—supremely skilled,
Restless with fixed to balance, high with low,
Thou leav'st the halcyon free her hopes to build
On such forbearance as the deep may show;
Perpetual flight, unchecked by earthly ties,
Leav'st to the wandering bird of Paradise."*

In these verses it will be noticed that Wordsworth has made reference to the lark's two main phases of life, its exalted mid-air existence, from whence it showers its song, and its lowly situation on earth when yearly it rears its broods. This contrast of positions is one of the most poetical facts related to the lark, the antithesis is perfect. Whenever we hear the lark singing from its exalted station, we should remember its lowly nest; we should remember, as Wordsworth says—

"Beneath 'the random *bield* of clod or stone'
Myriads of daisies have shone forth in flower
Near the Lark's nest."

In his poem entitled "Liberty," the poet asks—

"Who can divine what impulses from God
Reach the caged Lark, within a town-abode,
From his poor inch or two of daisied sod?"

It is always a pitiful sight to see the poor confined bird trampling its turf and fluttering his wings against

* "A Morning Exercise."

the cruel bars, as if muscular motion was with him a necessary accompaniment to the vibrations of the small throat from which he pours his sublime melody. I do not wonder that the poet who dedicated upwards of seventy sonnets to liberty prays—

"O yield him back his privilege."

Mr. Newton tells us that several cases are known of skylarks living nineteen or twenty years in captivity, and many instances of them breeding in confinement are recorded. A great amount has been written against the practice of caging larks. But the question has two sides, and we must not, as Thomson says, "think of the lark alone." We must think of the delight, and in many cases solace, the caged lark often gives to those who toil in pain! It is not those who can get out into the green country who generally imprison this bird, but those who can never leave their dreary houses from one year to another. It is impossible to understand how much pleasure that pent-up little bird affords its owner every day of his life!

The Wordsworthian student will have noticed that so far I have avoided extracting a single word from the poet's two charming odes to the Skylark. This I have done because, firstly, I wish the reader to have these odes before him in their entirety; and secondly, I have thus preserved them whole and undivided, in order that my reader will the better be able mentally to weigh their worth as ornithological gems of literature.

Shelley's "To a Skylark" is a magnificent produc-

tion; these, his lines, have done much to consecrate the bird—

"Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

"Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

"In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are brightening,
Thou dost float and run;
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

"The pale purple even
Melts around thy flight;
Like a star of Heaven,
In the broad daylight
Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight.

"Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere,
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear,
Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there.

"All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams, and heaven is overflowed.

"What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see,
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

"Like a poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

"Like a high-born maiden
In a palace-tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour
With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower:

"Like a glow-worm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering unbeholden
Its aërial hue
Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view:

"Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflowered,
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much sweet these heavy-winged thieves:

"Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain awakened flowers,
All that ever was
Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass:

"Teach us, sprite or bird,
What sweet thoughts are thine;
I have never heard
Praise of love or wine
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.

"Chorus Hymenæal,
Or triumphal chaunt;
Matched with thine would be all
But an empty vaunt,
A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

"What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain?
What fields, or waves, or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

"With thy clear keen joyance
Languor cannot be:
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee:
Thou lovest; but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.

"Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

"We look before and after,
And pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

"Yet if we could scorn
Hate, and pride, and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

"Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!

"Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow,
The world should listen then, as I am listening now."

Let me not for a moment attempt to detract a particle from the inestimable worth of this exquisite ode. In it we see Shelley stretched upon his back, and we hear his meditations about the lark. From the beginning to the close we are with Shelley, and he is pouring out to us the thoughts the lark's joyous song fills his poetic mind with. When we have "To a Skylark" before us, we can clearly read the ideas that fill one drop in the vast flood of humanity about one drop in the infinitely vaster flood of animate Nature. We are with Shelley, I say. He has come down from that feudal isolation which is too often the standpoint of our finest poets, to mix in the democratic crowds to which we belong. The poem is written in that spirit of nature which knows neither personal nor social distinction. It is a poem readable to all, to naturalist and anti-naturalist alike. The ode is a masterpiece of English versification; it is characteristically Shelley's.

But it is time we returned to Wordsworth's ode—

"Up with me! up with me into the clouds!
For thy song, lark, is strong:
Up with me, up with me into the clouds!
Singing, singing,
With clouds and sky about thee ringing,
Lift me, guide me till I find
That spot which seems so to thy mind.

"I have walked through wildernesses dreary,
And to-day my heart is weary;
Had I now the wings of a faery
Up to thee would I fly.
There is madness about thee, and joy divine
In that song of thine;
Up with me, up with me, high and high
To thy banqueting-place in the sky!

"Joyous as morning,
Thou art laughing and scorning;
Thou hast a nest for thy love and thy rest,
And, though little troubled with sloth,
Drunken lark! thou wouldst be loth
To be such a traveller as I.
Happy, happy liver,
With a soul as strong as a mountain river,
Pouring out praise to the Almightly Giver,
Joy and jollity be with us both!

"Alas! my journey, rugged and uneven,
Through prickly moors or dusty ways must wind;
But hearing thee, or others of thy kind,
As full of gladness and as free of heaven,
I, with my fate contented, will plod on,
And hope for higher raptures, when life's days is done."

Although it is somewhat difficult to see the similarity which is said to exist between this ode and Shelley's, a would-be critic has called Wordsworth's a flitter-winged endeavour to accompany the sky-searching flight of Shelley's "Skylark." The preposterous absurdity of this statement will be seen at a glance. Having ventured so far, it is peculiar that the compiler of this profound embodiment of unsupportable fact should stop here. Surely it would have been quite

as laudable had he advanced a theory that Wordsworth's apostrophe of "drunken lark" is directly plagiarized from Fielding's "History of Tom Jones"! Has he forgotten that in this widely-read book there exists a passage which tells of Partridge being made "drunk with joy" by the unexpected discovery of the heroine Sophia? As a poet of nature, Wordsworth's sentiment is far more profound than that of Shelley. The main cause of this may be the negation of self in Shelley's writings, which expresses itself in abstractions as intensely realised as they are delicately beautiful. The indestructible personality of Wordsworth can never forget itself, either in the company of his fellow-men, whatever their degrees, or of nature, howsoever countless her paths. His spirit, like that of Shelley, is divine; but it is, as Posnett says, no mere fragment of a vast divinity; backwards into the illimitable past, forwards into the illimitable future, now and for ever in the face of man and nature, it dwells, has dwelt, shall dwell, like a star apart in an individuality unmade, unmakable, unchangeable. Before this profound sense of personality, partially Platonic, partially Christian, but most of all awakened by the physical and social conditions of the poet's age, Nature assumes a depth of meaning which only beings of Wordsworthian mould may feel. Byron's descriptive powers, and Shelley's musical communion with the sounds of Nature, give place to a realisation of her being all the more terribly significant because the observer refuses

to reconcile its conflict with his own personality, either by material or immaterial unity; and while the associations of his childhood, youth, and age become consecrated as the earthly dress of an eternal being—not the melancholy entirety of one made of such stuff as dreams are made of—Wordsworth fears not to be materialized by the companionship of Nature, because he has neither defied her being at the expense of his own, nor denied her divinity in order to make himself eternal.

Wordsworth's second ode is more in keeping with natural facts; therefore, if anything, it is the more valuable:—

"Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!
  Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?
Or, while the wings aspire, are heart and eye
  Both with thy nest upon the dewy ground?
Thy nest which thou canst drop into at will,
Those quivering wings composed, that music still!

"To the last point of vision, and beyond,
  Mount, daring warbler, that love-prompted strain
('Twixt thee and thine a never-failing bond)
  Thrills not the less the bosom of the plain:
Yet mightest thou seem, proud privilege! to sing
All independent of the leafy spring.

"Leave to the nightingale her shady wood;
  A privacy of glorious light is thine;
Whence thou dost pour upon the world a flood
  Of harmony, with rapture more divine;
Type of the wise who soar, but never roam;
True to the kindred points of heaven and home!"

The poet was evidently not aware that larks do, to a certain extent, "roam." Severe frost will force them to move from north to south, and besides in November

and September vast flocks may often be seen flying inland from off the sea.

If we would be properly furnished with a thoroughly poetical history of the skylark we must turn to Grahame's "Birds of Scotland." The Scotch poet writes of the lark as a bird and not as an "ethereal minstrel":

"Come, Fancy, hover high as eagle's wing,
Bend thy keen eye o'er Scotland's hills and dales;
Float o'er her farthest isles; glance o'er the main;
Or, in this briary dale, flit with the wren,
From twig to twig; or on the grassy ridge,
Low nestle with the lark. Thou, simple bird,
Of all the vocal quire, dwell'st in a home
The humblest; yet thy morning song ascends
Nearest to Heaven, sweet emblem of his song,*
Who sung thee waukening by the daisy's side!

"With earliest spring, while yet the wheaten blade
Scarce shoots above the new-fallen shower of snow,
The skylark's note, in short excursion, warbles:
Yes! even amid the day-obscuring fall,
I've marked his wing winnowing the feathery flakes,
In widely-circling horizontal flight.
But when the season genial smiles, he towers
In lofty poise, with sweeter, fuller pipe,
Cheering the ploughman at his furrow end,
The while he clears the share, or, listening, leans
Upon his paddle-staff, and, with raised hand,
Shadows his half-shut eyes, striving to scan
The songster melting in the flood of light.

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* Burns:

"And when the lark, 'tween light and dark,
Blythe waukens by the daisy's side,
And mounts, and sings, on fluttering wings,
A waeworn ghaist I hameward glide."

"On tree, or bush, no lark was ever seen:
The daisied lea he loves, where tufts of grass
Luxuriant crown the ridge; there, with his mate,
He founds their lowly house, of withered bents,
And coarsest spear grass; next, the inner work
With finer, and still finer fibres lays,
Rounding it curious with the speckled breast.
How strange this untaught art! it is the gift,
The gift innate of Him, without whose will
Not even a sparrow falleth to the ground.

"And now the assiduous dam her red-specked treasure,
From day to day increases, till complete
The wonted number, blythe, beneath her breast,
She cherishes from morn to eve, from eve
To morn shields from the dew, that globuled lies
Upon her mottled plumes: then with the dawn
Upsprings her mate, and wakes her with his song.
His song full well she knows, even when the sun,
High in his morning course, is hailed at once
By all the lofty warblers of the sky;
But most his downward-veering song she loves;
Slow the descent at first, then, by degrees,
Quick, and more quick, till suddenly the note
Ceases; and, like an arrow-fledged, he darts,
And, softly lighting, perches by her side.

"But now no time for hovering welkin high,
Or downward-gliding strain; the young have chipped,
Have burst the brittle cage, and gaping bills
Claim all the labour of the parent pair."

But we are indebted to Eric Mackay for the latest ode to the lark, one of peculiar gracefulness and impassioned beauty. In my opinion this is a better production than either of Wordsworth's, superior to Hogg's, and though not so intellectual as Shelley's, rivals it in truth. Mackay's is the lark itself, Shelley's is himself listening,

with unwearied ears and tightly stretched imagination, to the lark. Who is surprised that Mackay's lyric "The Waking of the Lark" sent a thrill through the heart of America? This, a poem which appeared in the *New York Independent*, is undoubtedly the poem of the future. From the opening stanza to the closing stanza there is not an imperfect verse, not a commonplace. The sentiment is pure, and the fancy is glowing. It is indeed an exquisite ode.

## THE WAKING OF THE LARK.

I.

"O bonnie bird, that in the brake, exultant, dost prepare thee—
As poets do whose thoughts are true—for wings that will upbear thee.
O! tell me, tell me, bonnie bird,
Canst thou not pipe of hope deferred?
Or canst thou sing of naught but spring among the golden meadows?

II.

"Methinks a bard (and thou art one) should suit his song to sorrow,
And tell of pain, as well as gain, that waits us on the morrow;
But thou art not a prophet, thou,
If naught but joy can touch thee now;
If, in thy heart, thou hast no vow that speaks of Nature's anguish.

III.

"Oh! I have held my sorrows dear, and felt, tho' poor and slighted,
The songs we love are those we hear when love is unrequited.
But thou art still the slave of dawn,
And canst not sing till night be gone,
Till o'er the pathway of the fawn the sunbeams shine and quiver.

IV.

"Thou art the minion of the sun that rises in his splendour,
And canst not spare for Dian fair the songs that should attend her.
The moon, so sad and silver-pale,
Is mistress of the nightingale;
And thou wilt sing on hill and dale no ditties in the darkness.

V.

"For Queen and King thou wilt not spare one note of thine outpouring;
Thou art as free as breezes be on Nature's velvet flooring.
The daisy, with its hood undone,
The grass, the sunlight, and the sun—
These are the joys, thou holy one, that pay thee for thy singing.

VI.

"Oh, hush! oh, hush! how wild a gush of rapture in the distance,—
A roll of rhymes, a toll of chimes, a cry for love's assistance;
A sound that wells from happy throats,
A flood of song where beauty floats,
And where our thoughts, like golden boats, do seem to cross a river.

VII.

"This is the advent of the lark—the priest in gray apparel—
Who doth prepare to trill in air his sinless summer carol;
This is the prelude of the lay
The birds did sing in Cæsar's day,
And will again, for aye and aye, in praise of God's creation.

VIII.

"O dainty thing, on wonder's wing, by life and love elated,
Oh! sing along from cloud to cloud, till day be consecrated;
Till from the gateways of the morn,
The sun, with all his light unshorn,
His robes of darkness round him torn, doth scale the lofty heavens."

## THE WOODLARK.

THE last bird belonging to the great Passerine order that has been specifically mentioned by Wordsworth is the Woodlark (*Alauda arborea*). This bird is often wrongly taken for the skylark, because of its colour and general appearance; but in reality it is a bird which possesseth a voice far gentler and much more flutelike. To the naturalist, the woodlark is readily known from the more numerous species, the skylark, yet it is easy to understand why the bards have not always called it by its distinct name, though many of their "larks" are none other than this semi-arboreal bird.

The woodlark, however, is smaller in size, has a shorter tail, is more distinctly marked on the breast, has a conspicuous light-coloured streak over the eye and ear-coverts, and its song is more in keeping with the song of the nightingale, being far more plaintive and polished than the skylark's chant of ceaseless beatitude.

This bird might almost be called the "lark of Burns," for while he has paid the skylark but little deference in his poems, this bird, which breeds with exceptional

rarity in Scotland, has been alluded to in a number of his poems as the feathered creature that—

> "Tell'st o' never ending care;
> O' speechless grief, and dark despair."

Gilbert White, in his learned poem, "The Naturalist's Summer Evening Walk," has written that part of the bird's history which refers to it as a songster, far more attractively and decidedly more accurately than any other poet. Who, being acquainted with the woodlark, can refuse to acknowledge the beauty, and at the same time the caustic precision of the naturalist's lines—

> "High in air, and poised upon his wings,
> Unseen, the soft enamour'd woodlark sings?"

Wordsworth refers to this bird in his "Excursion" as—

> "The soft woodlark."

Though the skylark's song is more gushingly powerful and possesses more variety of notes, the woodlark's song is far superior in richness of tone. Except when moulting, the bird sings practically all the year round, and the duration of each song is even longer than that "tirra-lirra" chant which is wildly warbled from the—

> "Tuneful bird! that gladd'st the skies." *

Undoubtedly the grandest song the woodlark sings

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* Shenstone.

issues forth into the wide ethereal zone, when the bird having attained the summit of its lofty flight by means of ever-widening circles, hangs overhead almost stationary, higher than the pained eye can follow, but its song while it spirally descends is as sweet and musical as Apollo's lute. It is singular that Wordsworth, who knew the bird's soothing song, should not have honoured it more in his poems, for it sings oft in Westmorland while poised over its mate, and daily, nay, hourly, expected progeny.

# Book II.

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# PICARIÆ.

*BOOK II.*

# PICARIÆ.

SWIFT—NIGHTJAR—KINGFISHER—CUCKOO.

## THE SWIFT.

IT is now generally admitted that in spite of considerable similarity in appearance and habits, the Swift (*Cypselus apus*) has little structural affinity with the Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), the Martin (*Hirundo urbica*), or the Sand Martin (*Hirundo riparia*). The sternal apparatus of the swift differs greatly from that of the swallow. Instead of having three toes directed forwards and one backwards, all four toes are directed forwards. Further, the swifts have no true complex song muscles, consequently their note is but a harsh scream. The more minutely we examine the two birds, the more we must be struck with their external similarity and internal difference. It follows that the swift, being structurally

unlike the swallow, is unlike any other member of the Passerine order. Indeed, the bird differs so much from any English species—the nightjar excepted—that a distinct order seems yet required. So far then, this bird —which is truly allied to the *Trochilidæ*, or humming-birds—holds a unique position amongst the *Picariæ*, and as it usurps the foremost place in that order, I have to recognise it in this, my second book, as the first bird which Wordsworth has definitely particularized.

The swift is amongst birds something like the apparition* of the "dark seance," and exhibits many of the traditional characteristics of such phantoms. It is a "screecher" † and a "deviling." It is as often thought to be tenanted by the souls of the condemned by the English peasant as the restless and sombre Manx shearwater is by the Moslems. Its flight is ceaseless. It is now far away in the East, and now in the dim West. From somewhere out of sight it darts into view, passes like a meteor, and disappears we know not whither. It comes from the extreme south of Africa, lives on the wing whilst here, and returns on wings which carry the bird through the "liquid air" at the

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* Canon Tristram says in Palestine the swift is a regular emigrant, returning in myriads every spring, and so suddenly, that while one day not a swift can be seen in the country, on the next they have overspread the whole land, and fill the air with their shrill cries. Occasionally the same thing, in a less developed state, takes place in England.

† The term "Screech-owl" is often applied to the swift.

rate of some 276 miles an hour. Except sleep, oviposition and incubation, almost every natural function is performed in the air, where its every motion is a marvel of graceful flight, evincing Herculean powers of endurance. The bird's migration is as mysterious as its life. One morning the air will be filled with piercing screeches, then before we have an opportunity of thoroughly studying its phenomenal strength of wing, it has left us to visit the Punjab or perhaps the Andaman Islands. Who is surprised that White wrote—

> "Mark the swift in rapid giddy ring
> Dash round the steeple, unsubdued of wing;
> Amusive birds! say where your hid retreat
> When the frost rages and the tempests beat;
> Whence your return, by such nice instinct led,
> When spring, soft season, lifts her bloomy head?
> Such baffled searches mock man's prying pride,
> The God of Nature is your secret guide!"

But this much we know about the swift. No nest is more revolting to look at, but no nest is built with more assiduous toil. Time was when it was thought this bird could not rise from the ground, yet the swift can both alight on the earth and rise again from it; but this is too troublesome and slow a process, every article that is collected to construct the nest is gathered—one might say invariably, so rare are contrary occurrences—on the wing. Bits of straw, dry grass, feathers, shreds of cloth, and exceptionally bud-scales and fresh petals of buttercups, have all to be caught while the bird skims up and

down on unflagging wings. But the labour does not stop here. Every particle of these aerial gleanings has to be glued firmly with a mucous secretion providentially provided. Nor is the architect yet satisfied. The structure must be hidden from prying eyes, must be begrimed with dust and soot, and that thickly. This done, the neatly arranged materials disfigured, such is the home in which the young are hatched, and, though the Hebrew *sis* or *sus*, "Devilin" or "Screcher," swift, transmigrated and condemned soul, or bird, love is not absent. The nest has been hidden to the best of the birds' abilities, and care has now to be taken that their ingoing and outcoming may not attract attention. It is at this stage that Wordsworth, when twenty years of age, wrote of the bird as—

> "A swift, by tender cares opprest,
> Peeps often ere she darts into her nest."

## THE NIGHTJAR.

THE first canto of Wordsworth's poem, "The Waggoner," opens with—

> "'Tis spent, this burning day of June!
> Soft darkness o'er its latest gleams is stealing;
> The dor-hawk, solitary bird,
> Round the dim crags on heavy pinions wheeling,
> Buzzes incessantly, a tiresome tune;
> That constant voice is all that can be heard
> In silence deeper far than that of deepest noon!"

The "dor-hawk" here mentioned is undoubtedly the Nightjar (*Caprimulgus Europæus*), a bird which preys upon the dor-beetle, an insect of large size, which when flying makes a continuous buzzing noise. So exactly do these lines fit the "spinner, "wheelbird," "night-churr," "churn-owl," "cochebranche," and "goatsucker," as various local terms specify the nightjar, that there is practically little difficulty in ascribing them to their proper subject.

It may be objected that the incessant buzzing, or perhaps I should say, continuous repetition of a single jarring note, which comprises the nightjar's song, is

always and inevitably uttered when the bird is at rest crouching lengthways—and not athwart as in the case of other birds—on a branch, and not when the bird is "wheeling" on "heavy pinions." This position, though generally that which the bird adopts whilst singing, is not invariable. While some naturalists have maintained that the bird utters its "machinery-like" note exclusively while squatting, as it were, on a bough of a tree, others, quite as scientifically correct, have positively asserted that the note is repeated while the bird is on the wing.

## THE KINGFISHER.

OUR most beautiful bird, the Kingfisher (*Alcedo ispida*), which can compare with advantage its gorgeous plumes to those of many tropical birds, has not been very fully recognised by the poets. Wordsworth appears not to have seen much of the bird. This is to some degree excusable, for what as a rule do any of us see of this bird? * We may be strolling on a river's bank or idling near some pond or lake, when quite unexpectedly between brown water and green foliage there goes a body of brilliant azure. A zig-zag flash of coloured lightning—for we can call it nothing more—remains for a second on our retina, and we know that a kingfisher has passed. Then it must be remembered that poets generally are not naturalists, that they do not search for poetic objects. While the

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* The kingfisher is a migratory bird, and like the swallow returns year after year to its old haunts. I have known a kingfisher return for three consecutive years to the same drain and pond, from 1888 to 1890, both years inclusive. These haunts being in my father's grounds at Grimsby I had several opportunities of watching the bird closely. I have also on one or two occasions noticed kingfishers scattered plentifully on Lincolnshire marsh-drains and water-courses from the last week in July to the first week in September. These, as Mr. Cordeaux remarks, are "probably Continental birds."

naturalist, who is generally believed to deal strictly with facts, traces the kingfisher to its home to inform the world about its haunt, the poet, who deals as a rule in emotion, sees but a streak of wondrous light, and that sufficeth him. The naturalist consequently knows the unpoetic, as well as the poetic, life of the halcyon. He is acquainted both with its magnificent plumage and its nest of disgorged fish-bones. The poet on the other hand sees naught but the poetic bird—sees just as much and little more than Faber did:—

> "There came,
> Swift as a meteor's shining flame,
> A kingfisher from out the brake,
> And almost seemed to leave a wake
> Of brilliant lines behind."

Had Wordsworth dealt with poetical mythology he would have discovered a rare subject in the kingfisher. Though the halcyon is no aquatic nightingale, as Savage recklessly makes it out to be, the myths which encircle this bird have done much to attract the attention of a number of poets. The ancient Greek myth was that Alcyone or Halcyone was a daughter of the wind-god, Œolus; she married Ceyx, who unfortunately was drowned. After a while the dead body of Ceyx was washed up on the sea-shore. Halcyone in dire grief threw herself into the billows, and was, together with her husband, changed into a bird, called Halcyon or Kingfisher. And now it is affirmed that when these build and sit on their nests they calm the seas for the

space of seven, eleven, or fourteen days during the winter; these are well known as "Halcyon days." Pliny writes,* "The Halcyones are of great name and much marked. The very seas and they that saile thereupon know well when they sit and breed. This bird so notable, is little bigger than a sparrow; for the more part of her pennage, blue, intermingled yet among with white and purple feathers, having a thin small neck and long withall. They lay and sit about mid-winter, when daies be shortest; and the time whiles they are broodie is called the Halcyon daies, for during that season the sea is calm, and navigable, especially on the coast of Sicilie." This notion has been turned to beautiful use by Milton in his Ode on the Nativity :—

"But peaceful was the night,
Wherein the Prince of Light
His reign of peace upon the earth began;
The winds with wonder whist
Smoothly the waters kist,
Whispering new joys to the mild ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave."

Dryden makes use of this legend—

"Secure as when the halcyon breeds, with these
He that was born to drown might cross the seas."

Coleridge in his "To W. Wordsworth," says—

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* Holland's translation.

"For peace is nigh
Where wisdom's voice has found a listening heart
Amid the howl of more than wintry storms,
The halcyon hears the voice of vernal hours
Already on the wing."

Shelley, Keats, Campbell, Mrs. Hemans, Garth, Cowley, Mant, and numerous other poets have referred to the kingfisher as a bird which possesseth a wonderful power to calm. Oldham says—

"A still tranquillity so hushed thy breast,
As if some halcyon were its guest,
And there had built her nest."

Wild, an old English poet, uses the same idea—

"The peaceful kingfishers are met together
About the decks and prophesie calm weather."

And Joan of Arc, in Shakespeare's *Henry VI.*, says—

"Expect St. Martin's summer, Halcyon days."

So frequently has "Halcyon," been used as an adjective of perfect tranquillity by the poets, Wordsworth not excepted, that it is needless to quote further illustrative passages.

To return, however, to Pliny, and his strange natural history: the halcyon's nest, he says, is about the size of a tennis ball, with a narrow mouth; it cannot be cut open with iron, but must be broken with a violet blow, being composed of the dry foam of the sea. Men are at a loss, however, he adds, to see how it can be put together, and some think it is made of sharpened fish-

bones, inasmuch as the old birds live on fish. Pliny evidently never saw a kingfisher's nest in his life; hearsay and fancy are too prominent in his ancient natural history. His curious fables are capital examples of the vice which permeates much of the ancient natural history of the world. Fancy, hearsay and mythology are too prevalent, and natural facts too scarce.

But whatever this wonderful nest was built of, under the name of *Halcyonium* it was thought to possess medicinal powers of great virtue. It was supposed to be a kind of spermaceti, useful both for skin diseases and for injuries of the eyes.

Beyond this Sir Thomas Brown gives us the mediæval folk-lore of the kingfisher. He tells us "that a kingfisher hanged by the bill sheweth in which quarter the wind is by an occult and secret propriety, converting the breast to that point of the horizon from whence the wind doth blow, is a received opinion, and very strange; introducing natural weather cocks and extending magnetical positions as far as animal natures. A conceit supported by present practice, yet not made out by reason of experience." Sir Thomas tried the result, and, of course, discovered that when thus suspended kingfishers had "a casual station, and that they rested irregularly upon conversion." The poets still cling somewhat to this notion. Marlowe makes a character say—

> "But now how stands the wind?
> Into what corner peers my halcyon's bill?
> Ha! to the East? yes."

Shakespeare, too, puts into Kent's mouth (*King Lear*, ii., 2)—

> "Such smiling rogues as these
> * * * *
> Renege, affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks
> With every gale and vary of their masters."

Again Dryden says—

> "He breath'd his last, expos'd to open air;
> And here his corpse, unbless'd, is hanging still,
> To showt he change of winds with his prophetic bill."

Indeed, in recent years, kingfishers have been seen hanging from the beam of a cottage as a vane to show the direction of the wind. There existed once at Southampton a superstition that a dead kingfisher suspended by the bill with a single thread would turn its ruddy breast according as the tide flowed or ebbed. In days passed these birds were kept in chests to prevent moths from destroying valuable woollen stuffs. It was thought once that the dead bird hung up would renew its feathers every year, as though alive. But tradition made the kingfisher of more service to man yet. It was a protection against thunder and averted thunderbolts. It increased hidden treasure, and bestowed grace and beauty on the person who carried it.

These recommendations, alas, have served the bird badly; for while man has killed it to enrich his pocket, woman, quite as selfishly, has stuck the bird's plumes in her hat to enrich her personal charms. Both, in that spirit of greed so prevalent in frail humanity, have done

their respective shares to make this lovely bird, if not a rarity, at any rate anything but common in England.

Such, then, is the mythology connected with this gorgeously-coloured bird, but we should waste time were we to seek the pages of Wordsworth for poetic myths. The reference I insert is short, yet one strictly descriptive of the usual glimpses we have of this bird, which, as Broderip says, "shoots like a meteor."

> "If I, a bard of ebbing time,
> And nurtured in a fickle clime,
> May haunt this horned bay;
> Whose amorous water multiplies
> The flitting halcyon's vivid dyes;
> And smooths her liquid breast."

Mr. Harting, picturing the brightness and beauty of the plumage of the kingfisher, and its straight and rapid flight, says, "When the sunlight falls upon its bright blue back, it seems as if an azure bolt from a crossbow had been suddenly shot across our path." Wordsworth's lines are a capital criterion of the poet's knowledge of the kingfisher as a bird and not as a—

> "Comfortable bird,
> That broodest o'er the troubled sea of the mind,
> Till it is hush'd and smooth." *

Its name tells the poets that it is the king of fishers, and they know that it is blue, and like a sapphire in brilliancy. Darwin has localised the bird for us—

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Keats' "Endymion."

"From osier bowers the brooding halcyons peep."

And Cunningham has given us a vague—a very vague—idea where it breeds—

"On the isles, with osiers drest,
Many a fair plumed halcyon breeds."

But we must turn to Browning for a perfect, and I might say unique—so sparing have the poets been with their natural history of the kingfisher—sketch of the bird's habitation.

"The river pushes
Its gentle way through straggling rushes,
Where the glossy kingfisher
Flutters when noon-heats are near,
Glad the shelving banks to shun,
Red and streaming in the sun,
Where the shrew-mouse with pale throat
Burrows, and the speckled stoat." *

Or to Faber, whose lines may perhaps claim pre-eminence over Browning's:

"Thou hast a fair dominion here, Sir King!
And yon tall stone beneath the alder stem
Seems a meet throne for a gay crowned thing
That wears so well its tawny diadem.
Thou hast a fair dominion, pools and bays,
With heath and copse, and works of plumy fern;
And tributes of sweet sound the river pays,
Changing to blithe and sad at every turn." †

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* "Paracelsus." † "The Kingfisher."

## THE CUCKOO.*

(*Cuculus canorus.*)

**As so little is known about the mysterious cuckoo, which is, indeed, within the volume of Nature :**

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The cuckoo has undeniably by its call christened itself. The Latin name *Cuculus*, a term of reproach, was given to the cuckoo by Linnæus, but "Cuckoo" is undoubtedly derived from the call of the bird. Canon Tristram tells us that a Hebrew word *Shachaph*, translated as cuckoo in the Bible, occurs in the list of unclean animals. The cuckoo may and may not be the bird implied, but there is room, inasmuch as the derivation of the word is from a root signifying to be lean and slender, for a doubt, and this doubt is magnified again by the Arabic name of the cuckoo being the same as our own. Many commentators have endeavoured to show that the Hebrew *Shachaph* denotes the petrel or shearwater, of which there are several kinds on the coast of Egypt and Syria, and which are exposed for sale in the markets. As these sea-fowl are not elsewhere mentioned, and from their subsisting on fish would naturally be inhibited as food, there is some probability in the conjecture. Besides the storm petrel which is uncommon, and too rare and small to have been noticed as food, the great shearwater and the Manx shearwater abound in the Eastern Mediterranean, skimming along the coast in long lines of many hundreds. As well as these there are many species of sea-gulls, common both on the coasts and on the Sea of Galilee, especially the great eagle-gull, the largest and most beautiful of

"The mystery of mysteries," *

unparalleled even by any of the mysteries of the monster son of Penelope, the nurse-terrifying Pan, the one great outrage† nature permits against herself, I ask the reader's license here to condense as much as possible the life history ‡ of this bird, in order that Wordsworth's treatment of Dryden's "foolish cuckoo" may be the better appreciated.

It is only right that we should first consider that part of the bird's history which we are best acquainted with, that portion which, unfortunately, often forms our whole knowledge of this vernal migrant, its somewhat monotonous cry. What wonder that the Hindoos justify "the koel's fluted song," as Edwin Arnold calls it, as a perpetual invocation of the Deity, for it is somehow in keep-

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all gulls, Andowins gull, which is very common, the herring gull, black-backed gull, black-headed gull, common gull, and several others, out of which commentators have endeavoured to prove an owner of the Hebrew word.

* Scott: "The Monastery."

† I am perfectly aware that in South Africa there flourishes a bird called "Coucou Didric," the *Lamprococcyx cupreus* or *Chalcites aureus* of authors, a bird of similar parasitic habits; and I am also aware of the fact that the custom of leaving the offspring's education to foster-parents is shared by many of the cuckoo's old-world relatives, and in America by birds not at all related to it.

‡ Although I have read numerous articles on the Cuckoo, I have never yet read one to equal that to be found in "Yarrell," fourth edition, vol. ii. I have unreservedly accepted Mr. Newton's erudite pages on this bird for my text throughout this preface to Wordsworth's notices of the Cuckoo.

ing with their undiversified and deafening music. Nearly every dweller in the country knows the ubiquitous, muffled cry of the vagrant yet "long-loved cuckoo," * and when it is first heard in the spring we reverence the familiar call, because we know that harvest time falls again before the dull, cold winter. But few comparatively know that this common cry of spring is uttered both when the bird is flying, and when it is perched in trees, and is rendered frequently in night's hours as well as day's. But the cuckoo is too vociferous on arrival, and very quickly the clear cry is ended, and "Cuckoo, cuckoo; cuc-cuckoo," a stuttering pronunciation, varies the plain form; † and this gives place sometimes to "cule, cule," a call which is uttered rapidly and continually repeated in softer voice. A bark-like angry note, and a noise expressive of "Cuckoo, witchet, witchet, watchet" ‡ is another variation which the cuckoo's throat

* Faber: "The Cherwell."

† The note of the cuckoo, like that of other great vocalists, is much affected by the weather; in times of drought it becomes hoarse, but is mollified again by the summer shower.

‡ For an excellent description of the organ of voice in birds the reader should turn to the article upon the Raven to be found in Yarrell's "British Birds" (fourth edition, vol. ii., page 269). The organ may generally be regarded as composed of four parts: (i.) the glottis or superior larynx, (ii.) the windpipe or trachea, (iii.) the inferior larynx or syrinx, and (iv.) the bronchial tubes or bronchi. The voice of birds is a peculiar gift of nature, by which the greater half are distinguished from all the rest of the animal creation. The glottis or superior larynx is supplied with appropriate muscles (inferior larynx), and the vast body of air contained

is prone to.* The female has no loud and musical cry to attract attention, one that they utter has been well compared to the cry of the dabchick and the call-note of the whimbrel: it is a kind of water-bubbling or whistling note.

The cuckoo is a characteristic scansorial (climber) bird. Nature rarely, if ever, takes up the chisel in her hand without perfecting the most useful, most delicate, and most excellently shaped tool, fitted to do its share in the toils and progression of the world. To the volvox she has given the means for locomotion; to the most insignificant rizopod a wondrous machine of vibrating hair-like appendages, which, as well as being the oars of these tiny creatures, drag towards their mouths the little victims upon which they feed. Botanists tell us of the almost terrible fertilising natures of the floral world, and

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in the air cells contributes to the force, and the trachea, by its form and movements, to the modification of the voice. Birds' notes are mostly, not altogether, an expression of love, hence they are heard singing chiefly at the time of pairing. To not another single creature have such various tones been granted for giving utterance to different feelings; the bitter pangs of hunger, timidity, the terrible dread of imminent danger, desire for society, yearning for a mate, or the calling of the attention of the young, not to mention scolding, are expressed by a variety of sounds, which make a language intelligible not only to birds of the same species, but also of other tribes.

* The female certainly does not sing, like the cock bird, during the time she is manipulating her eggs, or while she is in the company of the male bird. At a distance of about fifty yards I have on several occasions, from concealment, watched both birds through a field-glass, and I have never heard the female even attempt to call.

entomologists record strange facts—almost incredible facts—concerning the spinnerets and combs of spiders. Where, either in the depths of the gigantic oceans or on dry land, has Nature not fulfilled her unparalleled contract? From the smallest *foraminifera*, only visible by means of a powerful microscope, to man, "erect and tall," can we point to a flaw in the work of our great Creator? Where are we able to place our hand on any hitch or unfinished joint which is detrimental to the sublime harmony carried ceaselessly on amongst the innumerable multitudes of living objects created within the limit of those six days? It would have been an oversight, indeed, had a climbing *scansorial* bird only possessed a similarly formed foot to a passerine or a gallinacious bird; but such, happily, is not the case. What then could be better adapted to assist the clinging habits of the cuckoo than its characteristic zygodactyl feet, which have two toes directed backwards and two forwards? This is no common foresight, but a foresight the advantages of which must, without explanation, be seen and admired by all.*

The cuckoo occupies a great range throughout Europe, it is found occasionally as an accidental visitor in the

* There is a saying that in Nature there is nothing ugly. This is true, her preciseness is itself beautiful, but often where she appears at great disadvantage, being considered by some hyper-precise, she has completed, although may be to the sensitive human eye something positively revolting, the most exquisite implement, the one and only instrument fitted to its environment.

outlandish Faroe Islands, it inhabits the lands of the Vikings (occurring almost as high as the North Cape), it appears in the neighbourhood of the same latitude in Russia, Lapland, and it is also to be found in the south of Greece and its archipelago, and in the ancient fatherland of the Cæsars. In Asia it abounds through the northern parts; here—except on the Siberian tundras—it ranges to the Pacific. Its southern breeding limits appear to be in the dangerous Himalayas; and in winter it goes down to the Philippines, Burma, and Ceylon, while in Africa it reaches Natal. In both these continents closely allied species occur. Coming home, there is no county in England, Ireland, Wales, or Scotland in which it does not occur; in the Orkney Islands it is frequently heard. Having at once such a mysterious character and being so diversely distributed, the cuckoo naturally is seen by "all kinds and conditions of men," who ever set afloat strange ideas and unaccountable theories relative to its parasitic habits.

Need I waste space in mentioning that Carew's "drowsie cuckoo" is a migratory bird, which comes to us in the spring, about the middle of April,* on its migration from the south-east to the north-west? The cock birds precede the hens by a few days, and the arrival

* Mr. Cordeaux's average time for the last thirty-five years is the 14th of April, the same day as the swallows generally arrive on. But I would venture to assert that the cuckoo usually arrives here immediately after a south-westerly wind. Its arrival has frequently been reported in March or earlier still. In the ninth

of the latter may easily be ascertained, although the females are somewhat rat-like in their habits, because of the amorous contests between the keen and loud-voiced suitors. Regarding the date of the cuckoo's departure from this country, the end of July or beginning of August is stated to be the time, and oddly enough the old birds, both male and female, go first, and leave their much-neglected young to follow in the best way they can. Although these autumnal times are specified, it appears that the birds commence their outward bound movements from north to south only, and it is imagined that they do not finally leave the British Isles until rather later. Occasionally at the time of their quittal, considerable numbers of cuckoos have been seen collected together, sixteen were seen flying in company from the north-east end of the Grampian Hill, in Scotland, towards the German Ocean, distant about half a mile, and I have read that in the County of Down, in Ireland, not less than forty were once observed feeding on the caterpillars that infest gooseberry-trees.

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record on the migration of birds for 1887, I find on the 28th of March a record from Langness, "a cuckoo at 10 A.M." "Such records," says the editor of the fourth edition of Yarrell, "must be treated with suspicion if not incredulity." Mr. Harper state that a cuckoo's egg was taken in Norfolk, April 5th, 1851, and that on the 14th of the same month he saw two, one of which he shot. Mr. Boner informed Mr. Newton that, in a series of observations made in Sussex for more than twenty years, April 6th, 1844, was the earliest day on which he noticed the cuckoo's occurrence.

Naturalists tell us that the adult male cuckoo weighs about four ounces and a half, and that the adult female is inferior in size. Both are greyish ash above and on the throat, with small white spots on the darker grey tail, and dusky bars on the white under parts. The ring-shaped diaphragm which surrounds the pupil of the eye, the legs, and the feet, are yellow. The female sometimes shows a slight rufous tinge on the breast. The young are clove brown on the upper parts; there is a white spot on the nape, and the irides are brown. The length of the cuckoo varies from twelve to fourteen inches, and the wing measures about eight by five inches. The bill is black or blackish brown, and slightly bent, yellowish at the base of the lower one, and inside it is red. The birds of both sexes are sometimes found in spring of a rich chestnut brown, like a female kestrel, and because of this simple move in the colour of the cuckoo, it is, as well as being recognised as another different and separate member of the family *Cuculidæ* under the distinction of *Cuculus hepaticus*, shot by the ignorant peasants and gamekeepers, who frequently assert, with confidence in their own erudition of Nature, that "cuckoos turn to hawks," and boycotted for its superficial resemblance to a hawk by the lesser birds, to whom it undoubtedly proves deceptive.* So far about

* Dr. A. E. Brehm denies that they take the cuckoo for a hawk, asserting that their behaviour towards it is very different. Yarrell says the old fable of the cuckoo turning into a hawk in

as much of the story of the cuckoo's life as falls within the limited experience of most people in this country has been written; it is a story which differs but minutely from the natural history of most of our English migratory birds. What now follows is in our British list common to the cuckoo alone, making the bird intensely interesting, not simply to the ornithologist but to all those who truly love the works, common and exceptional, of Nature. No bird has attracted more attention, and of none have more idle tales been told, than of the—

"Rustic herald of the spring." *

As soon as, or at least very soon after, the cocks arrive they spread themselves over the country and await the arrival of the hens, who immediately commence a roving, unsettled life. The males are more numerous than the females, and while each individual of the former remains stationary in one locality, the females wander about at random. Cuckoos do not pair, but the hens are polyandrous † and consort with one cock after

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winter-time would seem to have had its origin rather in the appearance of the one coinciding with the disappearance of the other, than in their outward resemblance; though this, indeed, leads many people in these days, who ought to know better, into considering the cuckoo a "bird-of-prey."

* Akenside: "Ode to the Cuckoo."

† It may be rightly objected that I have not used the word "polyandrous" in its ordinary sense, the female cuckoo really being an ornithological courtesan.

another in succession. So local indeed are the male birds, that though a hen may often be seen followed by several cocks, she is not followed very far or very long, by any one bird in particular, her suitors "returning," as Yarrell says, "one after another, each to his own haunt, whence they continue to proclaim themselves almost incessantly."

"The eggs," says Morris in his "History of British Birds," "are not laid until the middle of May,* and they require about a fortnight's incubation." When laid they only measure ·95 to ·78 by from ·78 to ·61 inch; in a word, the egg of the cuckoo is not any larger than that of the skylark, although an adult cuckoo is four times the size of an adult skylark. It is variable in colour, but not to the extent asserted by some foreign oologists. British specimens are ordinarily of a pale greyish-green † or reddish-grey, more or less closely mottled with darker markings, spots or specks of different sizes, and also suffused with patches of a lighter shade. Sometimes, but not invariably, the egg of the cuckoo resembles in a wonderful way the eggs of the duped bird destined to become a fosterer. Ælian, who lived in the second

* Montagu found an egg so late as the 26th of June, and Mr. Jesse records that a young cuckoo, which had only just left the nest of a wagtail, was found in Hampton Court Park on the 18th of August, 1832.

† The cuckoo's egg is well figured in Mr. Kearton's "Birds' Nests, Eggs, and Egg Collecting." Mr. Cordeaux, Mr. A. C. Smith, and Herr Grunack respectively mention the discovery of abnormally-coloured specimens, blue ones.

century, declared that the cuckoo did not lay her eggs indiscriminately in the nests of all birds, but only of those that she knew to produce eggs similar to her own, which from their likeness would thus pass unrecognised and unsuspected. Salerne doubtfully confirmed this in 1767 by repeating the assertion of an inhabitant of Sologne to the commonly rejected effect that the hen cuckoo lays her eggs precisely of the same colour as those in the nest of which she makes use. In 1853 Dr. Baldamus independently professed a like belief.* This theory is not credited by Professor Newton sufficiently strong to prove and constitute an opposition to the instances so repeatedly recorded to the contrary by numerous eminent ornithologists, who have always been sceptical of its truth. I have myself seen two eggs which were deposited in one nest, consequently most

* Dr. Baldamus based his belief on a series of eggs in his cabinet, which in 1861 he showed to Mr. Newton. He subsequently figured a selection of sixteen specimens to illustrate his observations. Another series of sixteen has been figured by M. Nicoud to illustrate a paper by M. de Rougemont. It would appear, though, that to some extent Mr. Newton was satisfied "that the egg of the cuckoo is approximately coloured and marked like those of the bird in whose nest it is found," for the express purpose, no doubt, of deceiving the foster-incubator. Professor Newton states, however :—"Having said this much, and believing as I do the Doctor to be partly justified in the carefully worded enunciation of what he calls a 'law of Nature,' I must now declare that it is only 'approximately' and by no means *universally* true that the cuckoo's egg is coloured like those of the victims of her imposition."

likely laid by one bird, which differed slightly in their shades of colouring. Yet cuckoo's eggs placed in the nest of the Orphean warbler are chiefly distinguishable by their size; but eggs, as has been pointed out, of a pale blue have been found located in the nests of the hedge-sparrow and the redstart. It is simply out of the question to resist the testimony these undeniably abnormal specimens, which are frequently being discovered located amongst similar eggs, afford, and the supposition that Mr. Newton advances is that these eggs have been wrongly ascribed to the cuckoo, and that in reality they are only exceptionally large examples of the eggs of the birds in whose nests they have been found. This is likely, for it cannot be disputed that monstrous examples are occasionally found by oologists. Nevertheless Professor Newton, charitably not wishing to mislead, gives the student the mainspring of an opposition that might well be urged against his own view. It is a well-known fact that abnormally large eggs are deficient as a rule in their thickness of shell and depth of colour, and therefore it is only right that supposed cuckoo's eggs, whatever their colour or size, should be submitted to a drastic examination by highly scientific oologists.

Ornithologists would be wanting in common etiquette —although this should surely not be very much studied when dealing with scientific problems—did they for one moment disbelieve or disregard the important theories of either Ælian, Salerne, or Dr. Baldamus, for these

almost phenomenal records have been repeated over and over again. For example, Mr. Newton tells us that Herr Brawne shot a hen cuckoo as she was leaving the nest of an Icterine warbler, and found in the oviduct of the former an egg coloured very like that of the latter, while, on looking into the nest he saw there an exactly similar egg, which there can be no reasonable doubt had just been placed there by that very cuckoo. Although Herr von Homeyer has objected to this statement as relating an impossibility, arguing that in no bird do the fully-coloured eggs follow each other so rapidly that two such are simultaneously ready, and least of all in the cuckoo, where the intervals of laying are presumably long; the statement has been supported by the evidence of Saxby, who shot a cuckoo carrying an egg which she must have laid some time previously, and afterwards discovered a second and perfect egg in her ovary. Further, a parallel case is cited by Thompson on the authority of Kinahan, corroborated in certain particulars by no less scientists than Mr. G. Haughton, the late Mr. R. Ball, and Professor Allman. In this case, an egg, which the bird was carrying in her mouth, was seen by the first of these gentlemen to fall from it, while *two* full-grown eggs, one of them ready to pass into the oviduct, were found on dissection by the last witness. The often repeated assertion that cuckoos' eggs are only laid at several days' interval,* cannot be

* Yet the nest of the American cuckoo often contains eggs and young at the same time!

accepted unconditionally. Moreover, Herr Grunack has discovered, in an abnormally coloured egg, an embryo so fully developed as to show the characteristic zygodactyl feet of the cuckoo, thus proving incontestably its parentage. Bearing in mind that the two instances here alluded to are extreme cases, and that the most numerous instances are those in which not the least similarity can be traced, Professor Newton attempts an explanatory hypothesis, based, admittedly, to some degree on speculation. He says: "Some birds resent interference with their nests much less than others. Among the former is the hedge-sparrow, and in her case no assimilation is needed, in others it may be wanted. The tendency of habits to become hereditary is admitted, and since it is probable that a cuckoo commonly puts her eggs into the nest of the same species, it is no violent supposition that her posterity should have the same habit. Again, the family likeness between the eggs laid by the same individual is unquestionable, and therefore the habit of laying a particular style of egg is probable to be hereditary also. Combining this supposition with the last, it will be seen that on the principle of 'natural selection' the asserted facts would follow. This principle would operate most strongly in species which are not easily duped, that is in the cases which occur least frequently. Here it is we find it, for cuckoos' eggs, deposited in the nests of the red-backed shrike, the redstart, the icterine warbler, and the great bunting, approximate most nearly to the

eggs of those species, species in whose nests the cuckoo rarely (in comparison with others) deposits eggs. The assimilation of the eggs of the great spotted cuckoo to those of the birds in whose nests they are found, is in some cases very remarkable." Mr. George J. Romanes, in his "Animal Intelligence," meets Professor Newton's hypothesis by saying—"Granting to this hypothesis the assumption that individual cuckoos have special predilections as to the species in whose nests they are to lay their eggs, and that some of these species require to be deceived by imitative colouring of the egg to prevent their tilting it out, there is still an enormous difficulty to be met. Supposing that one cuckoo out of a hundred happens to lay eggs sufficiently like those of the North African magpies (a species alluded to by Professor Newton), to deceive the latter into supposing the egg to be one of their own—this I cannot think is too small a proportion to assume, seeing that, *ex hypothesi*, the resemblance must be tolerably close, and that the egg of the magpie does not resemble the great majority of eggs of the cuckoo—now, in order to sustain the theory, we must suppose that this particular cuckoo, which happens to have the peculiarity of laying eggs so closely resembling those of the magpie, must also happen to have the peculiarity of desiring to lay its eggs in the nest of a magpie. The conjunction of these two peculiarities would, I should think, at a moderate estimate, reduce the chances of an approximately coloured egg being laid in the appropriate nest to at

least a thousand to one. But supposing the happy accident to have taken place, we have next to suppose that the peculiarity of laying these exceptionally coloured eggs is not only constant for the same individual cuckoo, but is inherited by innumerable generations of her progeny; and, what is much more difficult to grant, that the fancy for laying eggs in the nest of a magpie is similarly inherited. I think, therefore, notwithstanding Professor Newton's strong opinion upon the subject, that the ingenious hypothesis must be dismissed as too seriously encumbered by the difficulties which I have mentioned. We may, with philosophical safety, invoke the influence of natural selection to explain all cases of protective colouring when the *modus operandi* need only be supposed simple and direct; but in a case such as this, the number and complexity of the conditions that would require to meet in order to give natural selection the possibility of entrance, seem to me much too considerable to admit of our entertaining the possibility of its action—at all events in the way that Professor Newton suggests. Therefore, if the facts are facts, I cannot see how they are to be explained." The reader must not be carried away by this apparently unanswerable rejoinder, nor must it entirely prejudice him against the hypothesis of one of the most scientific ornithologists who ever wrote. It is, as Newton states, especially necessary to guard against the error of supposing that the cuckoo has the power of diversifying the shade of her eggs at will; that, having laid it, she

should look at it, and then decide into what bird's nest she should put it; or further, that its colour can, in any mysterious way, be affected by the action of external objects on her perceptive faculties. The assimilation, if such there be, must be involuntary on her part, and its only object be to render it less easily recognised by the foster-parents as supposititious. Are we to believe that the cuckoo—knowing the colour of her own egg—seeks out the locality of a bird's nest which she knows to contain eggs like those she herself produces, and then use that bird as her dupe? This, let it be remembered, would be saying that the cuckoo knew the colours and markings of numerous birds' eggs, for the cuckoo sometimes places her egg in the nests of her dupes before they have deposited a single egg. Nor, on the other hand, must we for a moment suppose that Nature has given to the cuckoo "extraordinary degrees of cunning and address with an enlarged faculty of discerning what species are suitable and congenerous nursing-mothers for its disregarded eggs and young,"* for the cuckoo, although itself an insectivorous bird, having the thin *membranaceous stomach*, has confided its young to the care of the shrike, the hawfinch, the bullfinch, and several other birds which, not being soft-billed, never taste *Libellulæ*, or dragon-flies, or the "caterpillars that infest gooseberry-trees."

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* White: "History of Selborne," fourth letter to the Hon. James Barrington.

From five to eight eggs are produced by the cuckoo in a season, the same bird sometimes depositing two, and even three eggs in a nest.* If the cuckoo's egg were larger than it is, it would require to be laid in a larger nest, with the natural possessors of which the young one would be, or might be, unable to do battle.

Although Morris says that about a fortnight's incubation is required before the young cuckoo is ready to leave his shell, there is abundant proof that the time of the insertion is extremely variable. It may be inserted before the owner of the nest has laid any egg, or it may be inserted after she has completed her hatch. Several authorities say that cuckoos' eggs incubate sooner than other eggs—Dr. Jenner thought the cuckoo's egg was hatched first—but this still remains an open, undecided question. Moreover, there once existed a supposition that the egg of the cuckoo is already partially advanced towards maturity before it leaves the oviduct. The cuckoo's strange and singular custom of depositing its eggs in the nests of other birds,† thereby

* This is exceptionally rare, because the struggle for life which occurs between cuckoo younglings is of such deadlyintensity, that the old bird, perhaps being aware of this, distributes her eggs into several nests, the rightful occupants of which she knows full well her little offspring will be able to turn out.

† The notion which couples the name of the cuckoo with the predicament of the man whose wife is unfaithful to him, appears to have been derived from the Romans, and is first found in the Middle Ages in France, and in the countries of which the modern language is derived from the Latin. Perhaps it existed originally

freeing itself from the duty of further providing for its offspring, was known at the time when the Romans quailed the world, yet how it is deposited has scarcely yet come clearly out of a shadow of mist. We have

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among the Teutonic race, for we have doubtless received it through the Normans. Aristotle and Pliny both mention the fact that the egg is laid in the nest of another bird, and the young cuckoo brought up to the detriment of the foster-bird's offspring. But they more correctly gave the name of the bird, not to the husband of the faithless wife, but to her paramour, who might justly be supposed to be acting the part of a "cuckold." They gave the name of the bird in whose nest the cuckoo's eggs are usually deposited, *curruca*, to the husband. It is not quite clear how, in the passage from classic to mediæval, the application of the term was transferred to the husband. Dr. Johnson says: "It was usual to alarm a husband at the approach of an adulterer by calling out 'cuckoo,' which by mistake was applied in time to the person warned." Green calls the cuckoo "the cuckold's quirister." "This is an instance," says Brewer, "of how words get in time perverted from their original meaning. The Romans used to call an adulterer a 'cuckoo,' as 'Te cuc'ulum uxor ex lustris rapit (*Plautus* '*Asin.*,' v. 3), and the allusion was simple and correct; but Dr. Johnson's explanation will hardly satisfy any one except himself for the modern perversion of the word."

> "The cuckoo, then, on every tree,
> Mocks married men, for thus sings he,
> Cuckoo!
> Cuckoo! cuckoo! O word of fear,
> Unpleasing to a married ear!"
>
> SHAKESPEARE, "*Love's Labour's Lost.*"

Thus may not Vulcan's badge have originated from this prominent feature in the history of the cuckoo? The badge was the crest of "cuckoldom," in which Mars intrigued with Venus, the wife of Vulcan.

again to return to Professor Newton's able essay. He says—"There is abundant evidence that the nest chosen by the cuckoo is often so situated, or so built, that it would be an absolute impossibility for a bird of her size to lay her egg therein by sitting upon, or in the fabric, as birds commonly do,* yet so much caution is used by the cuckoo in her selection, that the act of inserting the egg has been but seldom witnessed. It is not allowable to assume that the practice is always followed, but there have been a few fortunate observers that have actually seen the laying of her egg on the ground by the hen cuckoo, who, then taking it into her bill, has introduced it into the nest, though whether she had previously found and surveyed the nest or not, is another point, on which no opinion has been reached.† Among such observers of one part of the operation, so far as our own country is concerned, the earliest seem to have been two sons of Mr. Tripeny, of Coxmuir, who informed Weir, as recorded by Macgillivray, that as they were tending cattle on June 24th, 1838, they

* Young cuckoos too have more than once been found in a nest whence it was not easy to see how they could escape.

† Mr. Morris says, "It is I think quite an erroneous supposition that the cuckoo ever meets with any delay in finding a nest suitable for her to lay her egg in. At the time when she does lay, birds' nests of all the common species are abundant in every hedge, and there is no more difficulty in her finding one than another. It has been imagined that she lays her eggs later in the day than other birds, and this possibly may prove to be the case."

saw a cuckoo alight on a hillock near them. "It picked up an egg with its bill, and, after having looked round about, as if to ascertain whether there was any one in sight, it hopped down with it among the heath. The lads immediately ran to the place into which they had observed it descend, and when at the distance of about six feet they saw it rise from the side of a titlark's nest, which was arched over with strong heath, and had a narrow entrance from the side; there was a newly dropped cuckoo's egg along with one of the titlark's own." But perhaps the most satisfactory evidence on the point is that of Herr Adulf Muller, a forester at Gladenbach, in Darmstadt, who says that through a telescope he watched a cuckoo as she laid her egg on a bank, and then saw her slope her head to the ground, take her egg in her widely-opened bill, and carry it to a wagtail's nest close at hand, in which he immediately afterwards found it.

Cuckoos indeed, have been not unfrequently shot as they were carrying an egg, presumably their own, in their bill,* a fact which has probably given rise to the belief

* "The earliest instance of this in Britain," says Newton, "seems to be that observed by Kinahan and Professor Haughton as reported by Thompson. Another was soon after recorded by Mr. Harper who saw a cuckoo flying with something between its mandibles. He followed and reached within twenty yards of it as it crawled like a parrot by the side of a drain in a meadow. Then it stopped and he shot it, when he found the substance he had noticed in its bill to be its egg." It is not said whether Harper found a nest by the side of the drain subsequently.

that they suck the eggs of other birds. The testimony in favour of this belief proves, on examination, to be very weak,* but it has doubtless been fostered by imperfect observation of circumstances, the true explanation of which seems to have been first supplied by the late Mr. Rowley. This gentleman, who, for a while, made the cuckoo his particular study, and had much experience of its habits, declared, as one of the results of his investigations, that the hen cuckoo seldom succeeds in introducing her eggs into another bird's nest without the act being resented, and consequently without using more or less violence and engaging in a scuffle, of which traces often remain. It would therefore appear that we may justifiably suppose that the cuckoo ordinarily, when inserting her egg, excites the fury (already stimulated by her hawk-like aspect) of the owners of the nest by breaking, turning out of it, or even carrying off from it, one or some of the eggs that may have been already laid therein, and this induces the dupe to brood all the more eagerly what is left to her. Though the fact that the cuckoo thus places by the aid of its mandibles its egg in the nest of another bird is well established, we still read similar

* Hoy says he detected a cuckoo flying away from a wagtail's nest with one of that bird's eggs in its bill, after having left an egg of its own in exchange for the one taken. Other ornithologists have given similar evidence, but, Newton points out the fact, "there is nothing to prove that the cuckoo meant to swallow its spoil."

reports as that from the pen of Mr. Davenport: "Found the nest of a sedge-warbler containing two eggs, in a small spinney near Ashlands on June 22nd, 1883. Just afterwards a cuckoo flew and settled on the nest, and remained there quite fifteen minutes, and, when she flew off again, the little nest was quite flattened out, and her egg deposited by the side of the two belonging to the sedge-warbler." Who is surprised that where it is convenient and possible the cuckoo economises labour?

The food of the cuckoo on its arrival here seems to consist of insects generally, and then the inner surface of the gizzard is smooth, but it soon begins to live almost wholly on hairy caterpillars, such as appear to be eaten by scarcely any other bird, and the hairs with which they are clothed accumulate in its (the cuckoo's) stomach, either aggregated into a globular mass, or insinuated, through muscular action, into its epithelium, and arranged in a regular spiral direction, so as to coat it completely, whence hasty observers have thought that this organ naturally has a hairy lining. In the stomach of the young also is often found a ball of hairs, which Jenner thought must have been obtained from, and swallowed while the bird was in, the nest; but the ordinary food of the nestling is, of course, such as its foster-parents would supply to their own off-spring, and accordingly varies somewhat with the species to which they belong. This includes not only insects of almost every kind, and in every stage, which

form the chief part, as well as small snails, but also soft corn, vetches, the tender shoots of grasses, and a few seeds, generally those of a *galium*. Masses of dry grass have also been found in the stomach of the young, sometimes so large as apparently to cause its death.* This will be the better understood when the reader knows that amongst the different species of birds that have been recorded as having acted in the capacity of foster-mother to this unhelpful child are the wagtails, titlark, redstart, whitethroat, willow-warbler, sedge-warbler, willow-wren, rocklark, yellow-hammer, blackbird, wren, reed-bunting, whinchat, grasshopper warbler, chaffinch, greenfinch, robin, all the shrikes, chiffchaff, hedge-sparrow, and thrush; the icterine warbler, which I have before mentioned; the golden oriole, that builds a pendant nest; ring-ouzel, tree-creeper, the pipits, ortolan bunting, hawfinch, mealy redpole, greenfinch, bullfinch, swallow, jackdaw, magpie, ring-, stock-, and turtledoves, and stranger than any, the little grebe, or dabchick.† Adolf Müller, before mentioned, who is regarded as an excellent observer by both Professor Newton and Mr. Sclater, has lately recorded a most remarkable phase in the history of the cuckoo. This circumstance was published in the *Ibis*, and is the translation of an article from the *Gartenlaube*, vol. xxxvi., No. 25, 1888. It is interest-

* Yarrell, vol. ii. page 404.

† This list requires revision; too much faith should not be placed in it.

ing, for it contains what is supposed to be the first authenticated record of a cuckoo hatching her own eggs. I quote from the *Field*.

"Oberforster Adolf Müller states that on May 16, 1888, he saw, in his district of the Royal forest of Hohenscheid, a cuckoo rise from the ground. On searching near the spot, he found three eggs in a slight depression. As he did not recognise these as belonging to any of the smaller birds of the district, and the cuckoo kept flying around, he concealed himself in the bushes and kept watch. He saw the cuckoo return shortly to the nest, and, thinking the bird would fly off after laying, he remained in his hiding-place for three-quarters of an hour before again approaching the nest. When he did so the cuckoo again flew off. Two of the eggs he recognised as those of the cuckoo, the third was smaller, and coloured more like that of a chaffinch. The nest, it may be mentioned, was on a small patch of bare ground, surrounded by grass and broom bushes. Herr Müller then withdrew to an elevated spot in the underwood of the forest, from whence he could, with his field glasses, survey the ground below. In a few minutes the cuckoo flew back, and after flitting about some time, alighted near the nest, to which she returned, and did not leave for more than an hour and a half, during which time Müller kept the spot in view.

"On May 25th the forester again visited the nest, when the bird flew off, leaving in the nest a young

cuckoo, apparently five or six days old. The two other eggs, which were apparently sterile, were lying near. On this occasion the parent bird kept circling round, and manifested much anxiety for the young one, who appeared less restless than is usual with cuckoos hatched under foster-parents.

"On the following day he saw the young cuckoo fed by the parent with green caterpillars, and in the intervals of feeding she sat upon the young.

"During the time that Herr Müller was watching the nest, he heard the notes of several males, and searching in the surrounding woods in the direction from whence he saw the mother cuckoo bring food to her young, he discovered on a group of oaks a large colony of the caterpillars, *Tortrix veridana*, hanging by their silky threads. These he regarded as the attraction that caused the concourse of the cuckoo.

"Herr Müller as a conclusion, says: 'What I have stated renders it quite clear—

"'(1.) That the cuckoo, in exceptional circumstances, incubates and hatches one or more of its eggs, which, in these cases, it apparently lays together in a safe place on the ground without preparing any nest.

"'(2.) That the eggs of the same cuckoo may be very different in colour and markings. If this be so, the purely theoretical idea held in certain quarters that each hen cuckoo lays eggs the same colour and markings, or of "one peculiar type," which are destined to be laid in the nests of one particular species of small bird, and

are nearly the same colour as those of the foster-mother, and that she only lays them in the nests of this species, falls to the ground.' "

Müller's record tends to destroy Ælian's, Salerne's, and Dr. Baldamus's theory.

This strange record—for strange and uncommon it is—recalls to my mind a statement made by the Rev. Mr. Stafford, communicated by Pennant to the Hon. Daines Barrington, and recorded by Derham in a manuscript paper on Instinct, and inserted in the Rev. Mr. Morris's "History of British Birds." Walking in Glossop Dale, in the Peak of Derbyshire, he disturbed a cuckoo from a nest, in which were two young ones, "and very frequently, for many days, beheld the old cuckoo feed there her young ones." Might not these young cuckoos have been originally hatched by the parent bird? This would appear not too great an assumption on my part, for, read a second corroboratory statement.* "The Rev. Mr. Wilmot, of Morley, near Derby, wrote Dr. Darwin word of the occurrence of a similar fact:—In the month of July, 1792, he was attending some labourers on a farm, when one of them told him he had observed a bird exactly like a cuckoo sitting upon a nest. The Rev. Mr. Wilmot proceeds:—"He took me to the spot; it was in an open fallow ground. The bird was upon the nest; I stood and observed her some time, and was perfectly satisfied it

* Morris: "History of British Birds."

was a cuckoo. . . In the nest. . . I observed three eggs. As I had labourers constantly at work in that field, I went thither every day, and always looked if the bird was there, but did not disturb it for seven or eight days, when I was tempted to drive it from the nest; and found two young ones that appeared to have been hatched for some days, but there was no appearance of a third egg." Whether the egg is put out to be incubated, or whether it is hatched by its producer, which is practically never, if it has been given the sufficient amount of heat, and providing it is not sterile, it becomes a living object so singular that nothing in ornithology parallels it in curiosity. I cannot do better than quote Jenner, one of the finest observers on the cuckoo, at some length. He says:—"The cuckoo makes choice of the nests of a great variety of small birds. I have known its eggs entrusted to the care of the hedge-sparrow, water-wagtail, titlark, yellowhammer, green-linnet, and whinchat. Among these it generally selects the three former, but shows a greater partiality to the hedge-sparrow* than to any of the rest; therefore, for the purpose of avoiding confusion, this bird only, in the following account, will be considered as the foster-parent of the cuckoo, except in instances which are particularly specified.

"When the hedge-sparrow has sat her usual time, and disengaged the young cuckoo and some of her off-

* Montagu Browne says the wagtail.

spring from the shell, her own young ones, and any of her eggs that remain unhatched, are soon turned out, the young cuckoo remaining possessor of the nest, and sole object of her future care. The young birds are not previously killed, nor are the eggs destroyed, but all are left to perish together, either entangled about the bush which contains the nest, or lying on the ground under it.

"On June 18, 1787, I examined the nest of a hedge-sparrow, which then contained a cuckoo's and three hedge-sparrow's eggs. On inspecting it on the day following, I found the bird had hatched, but that the nest now contained a young cuckoo and only one young hedge-sparrow. The nest was placed so near the extremity of a hedge, that I could distinctly see what was going forward in it, and, to my astonishment, saw the young cuckoo, though so newly hatched, in the act of turning out the young hedge-sparrow.

"The mode of accomplishing this was very curious. The little animal, with the assistance of its rump and wings, contrived to get the bird upon its back, and making a lodgment for the burden by elevating its elbows, clambered backward with it up the side of the nest till it reached the top, when, resting for a moment, it threw off its load with a jerk, and quite disengaged it from the nest. It remained in this situation a short time, feeling about with the extremities of its wings, as if to be convinced whether the business was properly executed, and then dropped into the nest again. With

these (the extremities of its wings), I have often seen it examine, as it were, an egg and nestling before it began its operations; and the sensibility which these parts appeared to possess seemed sufficiently to compensate the want of sight, which as yet it was destitute of. I afterwards put in an egg, and this, by a similar process, was conveyed to the edge of the nest and thrown out. These experiments I have since repeated several times in different nests, and have always found the young cuckoo disposed to act in the same manner. In climbing up the nest it sometimes drops its burden, and thus is foiled in its endeavours; but after a little respite the work is resumed, and goes on almost incessantly till it is effected. It is wonderful to see the extraordinary exertions of the young cuckoo when it is two or three days old, if a bird be put into the nest with it that is too weighty for it to lift out. In this state it seems ever restless and uneasy. But this disposition for turning out its companions begins to decline from the time it is two or three, till it is about twelve days old, when, as far as I have hitherto seen, it ceases. Indeed, the disposition for throwing out the egg appears to cease a few days sooner, for I have frequently seen the young cuckoo, after it had been hatched nine or ten days, remove a nestling that had been placed in the nest with it, when it suffered an egg, put there at the same time, to remain unmolested. The singularity of its shape is well adapted to these purposes; for, different from other newly-hatched birds

its back, from the scapulæ downwards, is very broad, with a considerable depression in the middle. This depression seems formed by nature for the design of giving a more secure lodgment to the egg of the hedge-sparrow, or its young one, when the young cuckoo is employed in removing either of them from the nest. When it is about twelve days old this cavity is quite filled up, and then the back assumes the shape of nestling birds in general. . . . But what struck me most was this, the cuckoo was perfectly naked, without a vestige of a feather or even a hint of future feathers; its eyes were not yet opened, and its neck seemed too weak to support the weight of its head. The pipits (in whose nest the young cuckoo was parasitic) had well-developed quills on the wings and back, and had bright eyes partially open; yet they seemed quite helpless under the manipulations of the cuckoo, which looked a much less developed creature. The cuckoo's legs, however, seemed very muscular, and it appeared to feel about with its wings, which were absolutely featherless, as with hands, the spurious wing (unusually large in proportion) looking like a spread-out thumb. The most singular thing of all was the direct purpose with which the blind little monster made for the open side of the nest, the only part where it could throw its burden down the bank.

"The latter remark has reference to the position of the nest below a heather bush, on the declivity of a low abrupt bank, where the only chance of dislodging the

young birds was to eject them over the side of the nest remote from its support upon the bank.

"As the young cuckoo was blind, it must have known the part of the nest to choose by feeling from the inside that that part was unsupported. . . . The circumstance of the young cuckoo being destined by nature to throw out the young hedge-sparrow seems to account for the parent cuckoo dropping her egg in the nests of birds so small as those I have particularized. If she were to do this in the nest of a bird which produced a large egg, and consequently a large nestling, the young cuckoo would probably find an unsurmountable difficulty in solely possessing the nest, as its exertions would be unequal to the labour of turning out the young birds. I have known a case in which a hedge-sparrow sat upon a cuckoo's egg and one of her own. Her own egg was hatched five days before the cuckoo's, when the young hedge-sparrow had gained such a superiority in size that the young cuckoo had not powers sufficient to lift it out of the nest till it was two days old, by which time it had grown very considerably. This egg was probably laid by the cuckoo several days after the hedge-sparrow had begun to sit, and even in this case it appears that its presence had created the disturbance before alluded to, as all the hedge-sparrow's eggs had gone except one. . . June 27, 1787. Two cuckoos and a hedge-sparrow were hatched in the same nest this morning; one hedge-sparrow's egg remained unhatched. In a few hours after, a contest began between the cuckoo for the

possession of the nest, which continued undetermined till the next afternoon, when one of them, which was somewhat superior in size, turned out the other, together with the young hedge-sparrow and the unhatched egg. This contest was very remarkable. The combatants alternately appeared to have the advantage as each carried the other several times nearly to the top of the nest, and then sank down again oppressed with the weight of its burden, till at length, after various efforts, the strongest prevailed, and was afterwards brought up by the hedge-sparrows."*

The young murderer having thus become the only object of the solicitous care of his foster-parents, thrives and grows very quickly, leaving the nest in about a fortnight or less,† being by that time completely fledged, though its wings and tail have not reached their full

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* Until Dr. Jenner discovered the fact to the contrary, some thought that the old bird was the murderess of the rightful tenants, others thought they were smothered by the disproportionate size of their fellow-nestling and their corpses cast out by their own parents.

† Newton says if taken when about this age the cuckoo is not hard to rear in captivity, especially if its keeper delegates the duty of satisfying its inordinate appetite to a cage-companion, for something of what may be called "fascination" is exercised by the young monster, which no bird that is wont to feed its own helpless offspring seems able to resist. Morris states that in several instances the cuckoo has been kept, great care being used, through the winter, until the following spring; one for nearly two years, and it was then only killed by accident. Buffon says, "Though cunning and solitary, the cuckoo may be given some sort of education; several persons of my acquaintance have reared

dimensions. Yet nearly as long as it remains in the land of its birth its wants are anxiously supplied by the victims of its mother's dupery. If it should happen that one or more of the little birds should be, by some means or other, preserved in the nest, their parent feeds them and the interloper with the like attention, making it appear that she cannot discriminate between child and foster-child.

What need is there for me to tell the reader that the bird's foster-mother is a loving, abiding deputy parent? There is no foster-bird like Victor Hugo's Madame Thenaidier, who brutalized the fallen Fantine's child! Foster-parent birds display the essence of care, and each of their tiny movements — the climbing on the shoulders to feed the helpless cuckoo fledgling, for example—are the actions of limbs, the members of a loving, anxious and over-flowing heart. Mrs. Brightwen, Vice-President of the Selborne Society, better

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and tamed them. One of these tame cuckoos knew his master, came at his call, followed him to the chase, perched on his gun, and if it found a cherry-tree in its way, it would fly to it, and not return until it had eaten plentifully; sometimes it would not return to its master for a whole day, but followed him at a distance, flying from tree to tree. In the house it might range at will, and passed the night on the roost." In, to some degree, contradiction of this we must not neglect to remember Newton's words. "In confinement the cuckoo is not amiable, and though it has been kept not unfrequently through the winter, has moulted its nestling's feathers, and, according to some, has been heard to utter its well-known cry, *it seems never to have been known to pick up its own food.*"

known as the authoress of "Wild Nature won by Kindness," has a chapter in her book which entirely proclaims a different tale. I give the chapter word for word:—"Looking out of my window before six o'clock one bright morning early in summer, I chanced to see a large bird sitting quietly on the gravel walk. Its feathers were ruffled as if it felt cold and miserable, and its drooping head told a tale of unhappiness from some cause or other. Whilst I was watching it, a little bird darted with all its force against the larger one, and made it roll over on the path; it slowly rose up again, but in another minute a bird from the other side flew against it and again rolled it over. Such conduct could not be tolerated, so, dressing quickly, I went out, and picking up the strange bird I found it was a young cuckoo, nearly starved to death, having, as I supposed, lost its foster-parents. The bird was in beautiful plumage, except down the front of its throat, where the repeated attacks of the small birds, *in showing their usual enmity towards the cuckoo*, had stripped off the feathers. The poor bird was only skin and bone, nearly dying from lack of food and persecution, and made no resistance when I brought him in to see if I could act the part of foster-mother. Finely-mixed raw meat and brown bread seemed to me the best substitute for his insect diet—but he was an awkward baby to feed—though sinking for want of nourishment, he would not open his great beak, and every half hour he had to be fed sorely against his will, with many flapping of his wings

and other protests of his bird nature. He would not stay quiet in any sort of cage, but when allowed to perch on the rim of a large basket quite free, he remained happily enough by the hour together. After a few days he grew into a vigorous, active bird, flying round the room, and too wild to be retained with safety. He was therefore let loose, and soon after flew quite out of sight; I should hope he was quite able to support himself by his own exertions. I must say he showed no gratitude for my benevolent succour in his time of need."

This is a strangely dissimilar record to those we generally read or hear. I was once informed by my esteemed friend, Mr. John Cordeaux, that he has seen a young cuckoo fed by swallows, as they flew hither and thither past the motherless hatchling. Mr. Ensor, the son of a tenant in the neighbourhood of Ardress, found a cuckoo in the nest of a titlark. He took it home and fed it. In a few days two wrens, which had a nest with eight eggs in the eaves, and just above a window fronting the cage in which the cuckoo was placed, made their way through a broken pane, and continued to feed it for some time. The cage was small, and the lad, preferring a thrush to a cuckoo, took it away, to give greater room to the thrush; on this the wrens repaired to their own nest, and brought off the eggs that had been laid.

Bishop Stanley relates two somewhat similar incidents:—"A young cuckoo was taken from the nest of a

hedge-sparrow, and in a few days afterwards, a young thrush, scarcely fledged, was put into the same cage. The latter could feed itself, but the cuckoo, its companion, was obliged to be fed with a quill; in a short time, however, the thrush took upon itself the task of feeding its fellow-prisoner and continued so to do with the utmost care, bestowing every possible attention, and manifesting the greatest anxiety to satisfy its continual craving for food.

The second instance is still more extraordinary:—"A young thrush, just able to feed itself, had been placed in a cage; a short time afterwards, a young cuckoo, which could not feed itself, was introduced into the same cage, a large wicker one, and for some time it was with much difficulty fed; at length, however, it was observed that the young thrush was employed in feeding it, the cuckoo opening its mouth, and sitting on the upper perch, and making the thrush hop down to fetch food up. One day, when it was thus expecting its food in this way, the thrush, seeing a worm put into the cage, could not resist the temptation of eating it, upon which the cuckoo immediately descended from its perch, and attacking the thrush, literally tore one of its eyes quite out, and then hopped back; the poor thrush felt itself obliged to take up some food in the lacerated state it was in. The eye healed in course of time, and the thrush continued its occupation as before, until the cuckoo was full grown."

Mr. Jesse relates the following circumstance, which

was written down at the time by Mrs. Blackburn, who witnessed it:—"In the early part of the summer of 1828, a cuckoo, having previously turned out the eggs from a water-wagtail's nest, which was built in a small hole in a garden wall at Arbury, deposited her own egg in their place. When the egg was hatched, the young intruder was fed by the water-wagtails, till he became too bulky for his confined and narrow quarters, and in a fidgety fit he fell to the ground. In this predicament he was found by the gardener, who picked him up, and put him into a wire cage, which was placed on the top of a wall, not far from the place of his birth. Here it was expected that the wagtails would have followed the supposititious offspring with food, to support it in its imprisonment, a mode of proceeding which would have had nothing very uncommon to recommend it to notice. But the odd part of the story is that the bird which hatched the cuckoo never came near it, but her place was supplied by a hedge-sparrow, who performed her part diligently and punctually, by bringing food at very short intervals from morning to evening, till its uncouth foster-child grew large, and became full feathered, when it was suffered to escape, and was seen no more. It may possibly be suggested that a mistake has been made with regard to the sort of bird which hatched the cuckoo, and the same bird which fed it, namely, the hedge-sparrow, hatched the egg. If this had been the case, there would have been nothing extraordinary in the circumstance; but the wagtail was too

often seen on her nest, both before the egg was hatched and afterwards, feeding the young bird, to leave room for any scepticism on that point; and the sparrow was seen feeding it in the cage afterwards by many members of the family daily."

In *The Naturalist*, old series, No. 16, page 7, Mr. W. H. Benshed recounts an instance of two wagtails feeding a young cuckoo, which had been taken from their nest; and on its being placed in a hive, where they could visit it, "delight and joy really appeared in all their actions. They rushed to and fro in the air, flying about the hive, and hovering near it."* I do not for a moment doubt the correctness of Mrs. Brightwen's record, for while the wagtails in Benshed's account succoured the young cuckoo, "swallows gave their note of alarm, and their young flew off, a wren approached and showed some signs of curiosity; a robin, who seemed disposed for hostilities, was attacked and driven off by the wagtails."

For dates, and a carefully kept account of the fascination the young cuckoo appears to have over other birds, we must seek the records of an admitted madman, an inmate of the Leicestershire Borough Asylum. As this is, perhaps, the first time that one labouring under mental aberration, temporary or permanently, has written upon Natural History, I shall accept Montagu Browne's example, and give the narrative in the writer's own words, *verbatim et literatim.*

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* See Morris: "History of British Birds."

"The Cuckoo and the Wagtails.

"I find in my little Journal of the Summer before last the following brief notes at the accompanying dates:

1886.

July 23, Friday —Young Cuckoo in Wagtail's nest.
July 30, Friday —Cuckoo caged.
Aug. 4, Friday —Cuckoo photographed.
Aug. 21, Saturday—Cuckoo died.

"Details may now be supplied from memory to each of these particulars.

"(1.) Our attention was drawn to the spot where there had already been a nest of young wagtails that summer. This was a few inches from the ground, in a fork of the ivy that covers the south-west wall of our principal court. The old birds were again flying in and out, and we expected to find a second brood. Instead, there was a big bird, nearly fledged, spreading over as much space as the four little wagtails together. One of our shrewdest men in such matters at once pronounced it a cuckoo, and we remembered that a large bird, which he took to be a cuckoo, had been seen on the green by one of our attendants some time before. The wagtails were quite as diligent in their attentions as they had been to their own young, and it was a pleasure to watch them daily. In a few days the strange bird was fledged, and hopped away with the help of its wings to one of the neighbouring bushes, when we lost it for some time, until the movements of the wagtails again revealed it.

"(2.) It was then that the thought occurred of putting it into a cage, so that we might watch the sequel. The wagtails seemed at first disconcerted, but an opening being made, by taking out a wire, large enough to admit one of them, they soon renewed their assiduities. Here it was quite interesting, and even amusing, to watch their proceedings. Incessantly flying in and out, both wagtails kept bringing midges and flies to the wide open beak of the big bird so awkwardly perched above them, that, as the best way of getting at him, they frequently lighted on his back, and

dropped their supplies overhead into his maw. And all this, it must be remembered, happened in a place where a hundred patients were walking round and round two hours twice a day—a fact which speaks alike for the conduct of the patients and the confidence of the birds.

"(3.) A curious circumstance now occurred. The hen wagtail took leave of her charge for some days—from August 6 to August 15, according to my friend Mr. Taylor's diary—for I have no note of these dates, though I remember the circumstances well—and her mate officiated alone. We thought at first there must be a new nest in the neighbourhood, but she returned too soon for that, and her absence remained unaccounted for. Both wagtails then continued the same course of unremitting and unwearied devotion. There were several attempts at photographing the cuckoo, with no very good success. On one of these occasions, when Dr. Finch took the bird in his hand and was trying to make it perch on his finger, it escaped and flew to the top of the wall, then over the top of the round house, and right over the next wall into one of the elm trees outside. A ladder was fetched, and the stupid creature, instead of escaping outright, kept its perch on a stout branch, as if fascinated, and so was easily laid hold of.

"(4.) The cuckoo most likely lost strength during the absence of his foster-mother, but all they could do together, with all their wonderful activity, was insufficient, nor was the help of flies, worms, bread, and pieces of meat, of much use. One morning we found it dead on the floor of the cage, and the wagtails fluttering about in piteous agitation. The hen bird took her station on the walk in front, while her mate kept watch on the wall, and when the dead bird was away to be stuffed, then only did they desert the place, never to return. We never saw them again, and last year there was no wagtail's nest in the court.

"R. W.

"Wednesday, January 4,

"1888."

There is a woeful sadness about these accurately-kept records, which, if anything, makes them all the more precious. They are a standing lesson to ornithologists, and yet they are the production of a mind that, though evidently clear during the time they were written, is, strangely enough, described as diseased. There is something indescribably yet intensely pathetic about R.W.'s Natural History chronicle.

The uncouth greediness which has been hinted at by these last records is the most prominent cheracteristic of the cuckoo when it leaves the nest, and this display is coupled with a stupid indifference, which amounts to absolute carelessness.

According to the several instances I have just quoted, it would appear that the parent cuckoos have no natural delight in their progeny, but from Adolf Müller's account we read that Nature has not altogether removed the senses of love from this parasitic bird. Besides Müller's narrative, Mr. Morris says that in some cases the cuckoo has shown a maternal bearing towards her offspring. Occasionally it has been even known for a cuckoo to feed its own young, and even lead the little one from the fostering care of the alien species.

The greatest question stands yet unanswered. How this parasitism, which is the chief mystery connected with Milton's "shallow cuckoo," can have originated, can be, aye, and will be for evermore, has yet still to be explained. Anatomists and physiologists have over and over again taxed their powers, and have over and

over again returned from their researches baffled and defeated. The conjectures that have been offered are inadequate, the various explanations hardly worth consideration. They are truly speculative, therefore, as a rule, totally unsound. It would be a merely useless waste of time to read half these, but a glimpse at the most important is advisable.

Bearing on the theory of the origin of the parasitic habit, Professor Newton, in his admirable essay on Birds in the "Encyclopædia Britannica," writes, "Certain it is that some birds, whether by mistake or stupidity, do not unfrequently lay their eggs in the nests of others. It is within the knowledge of many that pheasants' eggs and partridges' eggs are often laid in the same nest; and it is within the knowledge of the writer that gulls' eggs have been found in the nests of eider ducks, and *vice versâ;* that a redstart and a pied fly-catcher will lay their eggs in the same convenient hole—the forest being rather deficient in such accommodation; that an owl and a duck will resort to the same nest-hole, set up by the scheming woodman for his own advantage; and that the starling, which constantly dispossesses the green woodpecker, sometimes discovers that the rightful heir of the domicile has to be brought up by the intruding tenant."

Such then is one speculative theory touching the originality of this habit of cozening, which can only be regarded as a special case of a universal method which favours selfishness. Jenner was the first to emphasize

what he thought as obvious advantages of the trick. He asks, "To what cause, then, may we attribute the singularities of the cuckoo? May they not be owing to the following circumstances,—the short residence that bird is allowed to make in this country, where it is destined to propagate its species, and the call that Nature has upon it, during that short residence, to produce a numerous progeny?" And then he goes on to explain, "The cuckoo's first appearance here is about the middle of April, commonly on the 17th. Its egg is not ready for incubation till some weeks after its arrival, seldom before the middle of May. A fortnight is taken up by the sitting bird in hatching the egg. The young bird generally continues three weeks in the nest before it flies, and the foster-parents feed it more than five weeks after this period, so that, if a cuckoo should be ready with an egg much sooner than the time pointed out, not a single nestling, even one of the earliest, would be fit to provide for itself before its parent would be instinctively directed to seek a new residence, and be thus compelled to abandon its young one; for old cuckoos take their final leave of this country the first week in July.

"Had Nature allowed the cuckoo to have stayed here as long as some other migrating birds, which produce a single set of young ones (as the swift or nightingale, for example), and had allowed her to have reared as large a number as any bird is capable of bringing up at one time, there might not have been sufficient to have

answered her purpose; but by sending the cuckoo from one nest to another, she is reduced to the same state as the bird whose nest we daily rob of an egg, in which case the stimulus for incubation is suspended."

Darwin supposed the habit to crop up as a mere fortuitous variation, as it occasionally does in the normally nesting American cuckoo. The result was an advantage to the parent, and also to the offspring; the former got away sooner, the latter were better cared for. Those that learned the trick prospered, those that did not were eliminated; and so, in virtue of its natural or unnatural success, the device passed from being exceptional to become universal, became, in fact, an inherited specific instinct. Commenting upon this, Romanes, in a somewhat speculative passage, says: "We have here a sufficiently probable explanation of the *raison-d'être* of this curious instinct; and whether it is the true reason, or only reason, we are justified in setting down the instinct to the creating influence of natural selection."

Monsieur Herrissant, a French anatomist, was persuaded that he had discovered the reason why cuckoos do not hatch their own eggs. The impediment, he thought, arose from the internal structure of the bird. The crop or craw of the cuckoo does not lie before the sternum at the bottom of the neck as in other birds, and he supposed that lying on and over the bowels, it incapacitated the cuckoo from performing incubation habits; but this falls to the ground, for the nightjar

and swift are similarly formed, and they practise incubation.

In 1831 a naturalist explained this strange defect of one of the chief dictates of Nature by saying that the character of the food of the cuckoo was such as to cause an enlargement of the stomach, but yet not of a nature to supply much nutriment, therefore, the cuckoo had not time to hatch her own eggs, much more to provide for her offspring, but Macgillivray disposes of this by telling us that the stomach of the two common North American cuckoos are "precisely similar" in structure and position to that of our own bird, and yet those species perform maternal duties. Yet a truer view of the habit is that which considers it as a deliberate expression of the whole constitution of the bird.

The general character of the cuckoo, as we have seen, is very significant. Brehm describes it as a "discontented, ill-conditioned, passionate, in short, decidedly unamiable bird. The note itself, and the manner in which it is emitted, are typical of the bird's habits and character. The same abruptness, insatiability, eagerness, and the same rage, are noticeable in its whole conduct." The cuckoos are notoriously unsociable, even in migration individualistic. They jealously guard their territorial preserves, and verify in many ways the old myth that they are sparrow-hawks in disguise. The parasitic habit is consonant with their general character.

The species consists predominately of males. The

preponderance is probably about five to one, though one observer makes it five times greater. In so male a species, it is not surprising to find degenerate maternal instincts.

Reproduction and nutrition vary inversely. The love impulses wane before those of hunger. Now there is no doubt that even among greedy birds the cuckoos hold a very high rank. They are remarkably insatiable, hungry, gluttonous. Even the anatomical conditions asserted by M. Herrissant to be important, the swollen low-set stomach, may have their influence in the cuckoo, which has certain other peculiarities, though the same conditions may be overcome in other birds which remain perfectly natural. It might almost be suggested that the habit of feeding so largely as cuckoos do on hairy caterpillars, whose indigestible hairs form a fretwork in the gizzard, may also have its irritant, gizzard-fretting, dyspeptic influence. But the main point is, that in a bird with so strong nutritive impulses, it is little wonder the reproductive emotions are degenerate. There is too much hunger and gluttony for the higher development of true love.

The reproductive relations of the sexes are at a lower level than polygamy, or rather polyandry. The males and females do not pair in the strict sense, there is no keeping company, though the males are said to be passionate during the breeding season. Nor is the female in its adult state externally distinguishable from the male.

The organs of generation of both sexes are very small

for the size of the bird. There is said to be a diminished blood supply. Little wonder then that the reproductive emotions are in degree slightly developed. The sluggish parturition, which is not entirely opposed to exceptional active alternatives, at intervals of six or eight days, is also striking and significant.

The eggs are remarkably small. While the adult cuckoo is some four times the size of an adult skylark, the eggs are about the same size. The American cuckoo, which is only occasionally parasitic, lays full-sized eggs. It is true that the size of an egg is not always proportionate to the size of the bird; but it is reasonable to believe that when a bird for constitutional conditions seems to require all it can for itself, then it will have less to spare for its reproductive sacrifice. To say that the small size of the cuckoo's egg is "an adaptation in order to deceive the small birds," seems to strain the natural selection theory to the very breaking point.

It has been usual in discussing beginnings to take some cue from the young stages. It is noteworthy, in this light, to emphasize the jealous cruelty of the young form, a fit prophecy of the adult character. In the restlessness of rapid growth, the nestling expresses the constitution of the species in its selfish monopolising greed and insatiable appetite. Observations are recorded of the persistence of the cruel disposition into adolescence, though it usually wanes with the anatomical peculiarity of the back not very long after birth.

The young form, at any rate, exhibits the essential character of the species.

Some corroboration is obtained from the character of the American cuckoo. There seems no doubt that it is occasionally parasitic, and it is interesting to note that observers speak of its unnaturally careless indifference for the fate of its young. The character, in fact, is less markedly evil; the occasional parasitism is just as intelligible as the occasional "reversion" of our cuckoo to ancestral habits, even in some cases to apparent affection for the young.

In the cow-birds, again, where the habit occurs in different species in different degrees of perfection, the character is strikingly immoral. In one species (*Molothrus cadius*), a nest may be simply stolen, or the rightful nestlings may be thrown out, or actual parasitism may occur as an exception. In *M. canariensis*, the eggs may be dropped on the bare ground, or fifteen to twenty from different parents may be lazily, and of course fatally, huddled together in one nest. Two cuckoo eggs are sometimes found in one nest. In *M. pecoris*, which is polygamous, the crime has been evolved, and the habit is that of our cuckoo, one egg being laid in each foster-nest.* The important point is the general immorality and reproductive carelessness, which in one species finds expression in an organized device. The general character of the birds, the unsocial life, the

* This is certainly not always the case.

selfish cruelty of the nestlings, and the lazy parasitic habit, have a common basis in the constitution. The insatiable appetite, the small size of the organs of generation, the smallness of the eggs, the sluggish parturition, the rapid growth of the young, the great preponderance of males, the absence of true pairing, the degeneration of maternal affection, all are correlated and largely explicable, in terms of the fundamental contrast between nutrition and reproduction, between hunger on the one side and love on the other. Similar unnatural or immoral instincts in other birds, in mammals, and even in the lower animals, are explicable in similar terms. The cuckoo's habit is a natural outcrop of the general character or constitution, only one expression of a dominant diathesis, we cannot explain it by any one separate and distinct fact.

In his recent important work on the "Origin of Species," Professor Eimer maintains a similar view. He briefly criticises the Darwinian explanation, which appears to him to postulate too many happy combinations. He maintains that the ancestral cuckoo acted deliberately in the trick, and some of this deliberateness of device may still persist. The explanation of the unnatural habit is to be found in the bird's whole character and mode of life. In this connection Eimer emphasises (*a*) the vagabond, restless habit; (*b*) the looseness of the sex relations, strong in passion, weak in love; (*c*) the irregular and gluttonous nutrition considered in relation to reproductive stimulus; (*d*) the slow laying

of the eggs, itself dependent upon nutrition, and pointing to physiological conditions which modify even the deeply-rooted impulse and instinct to brood; (*e*) the degeneration of social instincts, and the preponderance of the egoistic.

The optimism which finds in animal life only "one hymn of love" is inaccurate, like the pessimism which sees throughout nothing but selfishness. Littré, Leconte, and some others less definitely, have more reasonably recognised the co-existence of twin streams of egoism and altruism, which often merge for a space without losing their distinctness, and are traceable to a common origin in the simplest forms of life. In the hunger and reproductive attractions of the lowest organisms, the self-regarding and other regarding activities of the higher find their starting-point. Though some vague consciousness is perhaps co-existent with life itself, we can only speak with confidence and psychical egoism and altruism after a central nervous system has been definitely established. At the same time, the activities of even the lowest organisms are often distinctly referable to either category.

A simple organism, which merely feeds and grows, and liberates superfluous portions of its substance to start new existences, is plainly living an egoistic and individualistic life. But whenever we find the occurrence of close association with another form, we find the first rude hints of love. It may still be almost wholly an organic hunger which prompts the union, but it is the

beginning of life not wholly individualistic. Hardly distinguishable at the outset, the primitive hunger and love become the starting-points of divergent lines of egoistic and altruistic emotion and activity.

The differentiation of separate sexes; the production of offspring which remain associated with the parents; the occurrence of genuine pairing beyond the limits of the sexual period; the establishment of distinct families, with unmistakable affection between parents, offspring, and relatives; and lastly, the occurrence of animal varieties wider than the family, mark important steps in the evolution of both egoism and altruism.*

At the commencement of the Lake poet's treatment of the vagrant cuckoo, I asked the reader's permission to diverge from my original text and wander into a region of unprevaricating scientific fact. I now apologise, trusting that the interest of my biography will to some degree excuse my lengthy digression, for it is difficult to condense into a few pages a career of a species so filled with almost incredible outrages against Nature and domesticity.

The cuckoo stands pre-eminent as a legendary subject amongst birds. Being a sort of living myth it has ever been surrounded with traditional lore, and in the Middle Ages even with unfeigned superstition. Mr. Marryat found a curious legend among the Danes. "When in

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* See Geddes's and Thomson's recent most important work on "The Evolution of Sex."

early springtime the voice of the cuckoo is first heard in the woods, every village girl kisses her hand, and asks the question, 'Cuckoo! Cuckoo! When shall I be married?' and the old folks, borne down with rheumatism, inquire, 'Cuckoo! Cuckoo! When shall I be released from this world's cares?' The bird in answer continues singing 'Cuckoo!' as many times as years will elapse before the object of their desires will come to pass. But as some old people live to an advanced age, and many girls die old maids, the poor bird has so much to do in answering the questions put to her, that the building season goes by, she has no time to make her nest, but lays her eggs in that of the hedge-sparrow.

This superstition, which was discovered by Marryat, is still preserved among the peasantry of many parts of Germany and North Europe. The cuckoo must be asked in a respectful manner, or no answer will be forthcoming. Mediæval Latin writers have selected this superstitious custom as the foundation of many of their stories, of which the following, told by Cæsarius of Heisterbach, belongs to the year 1221: A 'converse' in a certain monastery—that is, a layman who has become a monk—was walking out one day, when, hearing a cuckoo, and counting the number of times its note was repeated, he found it to be twenty-two. 'Ah!' said he, 'if I am yet to live twenty-two years more, why should I mortify myself all this long time in a monastery? I will return to the world and give myself up to the enjoyment of its pleasure for twenty

years, and then I shall have two years to repent in.' He returned and lived joyously two years, and then died, losing twenty out of his reckoning.

In another, given in 'Wright's Selection of Latin Stories,' a woman is described as lying on her death-bed, when her daughter urged her to send for a priest, that she might confess her sins, to whom her mother replied, 'Why, if I am ill to-day, to-morrow or the next day I shall be well.' Several neighbours were called in soon after on account of the mother's getting worse, and they one and all urged what the daughter had proposed. But the dying woman replied, 'What do you talk about? or, what do you fear? I shall not die these twelve years. I have heard the cuckoo, who told me so.' But at length she became speechless, and her daughter sent for the priest, who came, bringing those things necessary to perform the last earthly dutiies. Approaching her he asked if she had anythng to confess. All the mistaken woman answered was 'kuckuc.' Again the priest offered her the sacrament, and asked her if she believed the Lord was her Saviour, and she gasped 'kuckuc,' and shortly afterwards died.

In one of the branches of the celebrated romance of Renart (Reynard the Fox)—an illustration of which is to this day to be found carved in Chester Cathedral on one of the choir stalls, written in French verse in the thirteenth century, and published by Meon—Renart and his wife, dame Ermengart, are introduced reposing together in the early morning, and discoursing of

ambitious prospects, when Renart suddenly hears the note of the cuckoo—

> "A cest mot Renart le cucu
> Entent, si jeta en faus ris;
> 'Jou te conjur,' fait-il, 'de cris,
> Cucus, que me dise le voir,
> Quans ans j'ai à vivre; savoir
> Le veil, cucu."

The cuckoo responded promptly, and sang his well-known note thirteen times—

> "Atant se taist, que plus ne fu
> Li oisiaus illuec, ains s'envolle
> Et Renars maintenant acole
> Dame Ermengart; 'Avés oi?'
> 'Sire,' dist-ell, 'des cuer joi;
> Vos semons que me baisies.'
> 'Dame,' dist-il, 'j'en suis tos lies.
> * * * *
> M'a li cucus treize ans d'aé
> A vivre encore ci après.'"

There are, or have been not long ago, in different parts of England, remnants of other old customs, marking the position which the cuckoo held in the superstitions of the Middle Ages. In Shropshire, for instance, until recently, when the first cuckoo was heard the labourers were in the habit of leaving their work, making holiday for the rest of the day, and carousing in what they called the cuckoo ale. Among the peasantry in some parts of the kingdom to this day, it would be considered extremely unlucky to have no money in your pockets when the cuckoo is first heard

in the season. It was also a common belief, that if a maiden ran into the fields early in the morning, to hear the first note of the cuckoo, and when she heard it took off her left shoe, and looked into it, she would discover a man's hair of the same colour as that of her future husband.*

> "When first the year I heard the cuckoo sing,
> And call with welcome note the budding spring,
> I straightway set a running with such haste,
> Deb'rah that ran the smock scarce ran so fast;
> Till, spent for lack of breath, quite weary grown,
> Upon a rising bank I sat adown
> And doffed my shoe, and by my troth I swear,
> Therein I spied this yellow frizzled hair,
> As like to Lubberkin's in curl and hue,
> As if upon his comely pate it grew."†

I believe in Norfolk to this day there exists a popular idea that whatever you are doing the first time you hear the cuckoo, that you will do most frequently all the year. "Hindoo and Mahomedan tradition," says Mr. Robinson, "alike invest it with sanctity; for in the former the cuckoo is the suttee revisiting earth, and in the latter it is one of the ten animals permitted to enter the paradise of Mahomet."

Jupiter was not insensible to the charms of his sister Juno, and the more powerfully to gain her confidence, mythologists tell us, he changed himself into a cuckoo, raised a great storm, and made the air unusually chill

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* See Chambers's "Book of Days."

† Gay: "Shepherd's Week."

and cold. Under this form he went to the goddess all shivering, and Juno pitied him, and ignorantly took him into her bosom.

The poets' cuckoo is a very commonplace creature; being a mysterious voice, the bards have preferred to reduce its strange history into a few lines, which almost invariably speak in some way or other of the cuckoo as "a voice."

Graham, in his "Birds of Scotland," writes thus much about the history I have just recounted—

"But, there, the stranger flees close to the ground,
With harshlike pinion, of a laden blue.
Poor wanderer; from hedge to hedge she flies,
And trusts her offspring to another's care:
The sooty-plum'd hedge-sparrow often acts
The foster-mother, warming into life
The youngling destin'd to supplant her own.
Meanwhile, the cuckoo sings her idle song,
Monotonous, yet sweet; now here, now there,
Herself but rarely seen; nor does she cease
Her changeless note until the brood full blown
Give warning that her time for flight is come.
How sweet the first sound of the cuckoo's note!
Whence is the magic pleasure of the sound?
Nor do we long recall the very tree,
A bush near which we stood, when on the ear
The unexpected note, Cuckoo! again
And again came down the budding vale.
It is the voice of spring among the trees,
That tells of lengthening days, of coming blooms;
It is the symphony of many a song.
Thus ever journeying on from land to land,
She sole of all the numerous feathered tribes
Passes a stranger's life, without a home."

Quarles, in his "Divine Fancies," has a reference to the cuckoo laying her egg in the nests of other birds—

> "The idle cuckoo, having made a feast
> On sparrow's eggs, layes down her own i' th' nest;
> The silly bird she ownes it, hatches, feeds it,
> Protects it from the weather, clocks and breeds it;
> But when this gaping monster hath found strength
> To shift without a helper, she at length,
> Not caring for the tender care that bred her,
> Forgets the parent, kills the bird that fed her."

But unfortunately Quarles pictures the young monster as too atrocious; he makes the bird out to be a murderer of the blackest dye—an ignorant, feathered gamekeeper in fact, which goes to war against a number of its best friends! The cuckoo may be a murderer of a few useless, space-usurping foster-brethren, but it is questionable whether it slays its mother when she is no longer of any service, like a man does a horse which has worked daily for him for years.

Shakespeare, besides his passage in *Lucrece*—

> "Why should the worm intrude the maiden bud,
> Or hateful cuckoos hatch in sparrows' nests?"

—has written in *King Lear* a passage somewhat similar to that just quoted from Quarles—

> "And, being fed by us, you us'd us so
> As that ungentle gull, the cuckoo's bird,*

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* The young cuckoo. Compare expression to be found in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*:—

"Take heed, ere summer comes, or cuckoo-birds do sing."

Useth the sparrow; did oppress our nest,
Grew by our feeding to so great a bulk,
That even our love durst not come near your sight,
For fear of swallowing."

If this was an actual fact, it would be surely a terrible stigma on the harmony which is said to exist in Nature. The French proverb, "Ingrat comme un coucou," would need revision!

About the cuckoo's migratory habits we can gain no knowledge from the poets, with the exception that it retires in autumn and reappears in summer. Nay, the total disappearance of the bird baffled Carew, for he wrote

"The warm sense . . . . . .
. . . . . gives a second birth
To the dead swallow; wakes in hollow tree
The drowsie cuckoo."

Carew was not alone in his belief that instead of crossing the seas and seeking new pastures, the cuckoo lazily hybernated, for Brown has said—

"For in his hollowe trunk the perished graine,
The cuckowe nowe had many a winter laine."

Wisely, with but few exceptions which are nearly all unperceivable, so vague are they, the bards have judiciously omitted to make poetical reference to the word "cuckoo" used as a term of reproach. Occasionally we come across such lines as—

"The nightingale, the pretty nightingale,
The sweetest singer in all the forest's quire,
Entreats thee, sweet Peggy, to hear thy true love's tale;
Lo! yonder she sitteth, her heart against a brier.

"But O! I spy the cuckoo, the cuckoo, the cuckoo;
See where she sitteth; come away, my joy;
Come away, I prithee, I do not like the cuckoo
Should sing where my Peggy I kiss and toy."*

Or Spenser may write—

"But 'mongst them all, which did Love's honor rayse,
No word was heard of her that most it ought;
But she his precept proudly disobayes,
And doth his ydle message set at nought.
Therefore, O Love! unlesse she turne to thee
E'er cuckow end let her a rebell be!"

Again Beaumont and Fletcher call the cuckoo "slanderous." Although on the face of them such expressions and lines appear suggestive, there is no ground on which to base an accusation.

Indeed, one could rightly affirm that the poets' knowledge of the bird is restricted within the lines of that old doggerel which says—

"In March he leaves his perch,
In April come he will,
In May he sings all day,
In June he changes his tune,
In July he's ready to fly,
Come August go he must,
In September you'll him remember,
But October he'll never get over."

As a "voice" heard in spring, no one has written as beautifully about the cuckoo as Wordsworth. His "Ode to the Cuckoo" is every jot as excellent as

* Wilson: "Shoemaker's Holiday."

Shelley's "To a Skylark." Listen to the exquisite lines the poet writes about the mysterious cuckoo!—

"O blithe new-comer! I have heard,
I hear thee and rejoice.
O cuckoo! shall I call thee bird,
Or but a wandering voice?

"While I am lying on the grass
Thy twofold shout I hear,
From hill to hill it seems to pass,
At once far off and near.

"Though babbling only to the vale
Of sunshine and of flowers,
Thou bringest unto me a tale
Of visionary hours.

"Thrice welcome, darling of the spring!
Even yet thou art to me
No bird, but an invisible thing,
A voice, a mystery.

"The same whom in my schoolboy days
I listened to; that cry
Which made me look a hundred ways
In bush, and tree, and sky.

"To seek thee did I often rove
Through woods and on the green;
And thou wert still a hope, a love;
Still longed for, never seen.

"And I can listen to thee yet;
Can lie upon the plain
And listen, till I do beget
That golden time again.

"O blessed bird! the earth we pace
Again appears to be
An unsubstantial faery place,
That is fit home for thee!" *

This poem is admitted to be one of the most exquisite odes in the English language, and as so much has already been said in its praise, it is useless for me to increase the round of compliments which encircle it. Wordsworth has consecrated the cuckoo as only a true poet of Nature could do.

Without a demurrer, Wordsworth treats the twofold

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* It has actually been proposed that Wordsworth benefited by Logan's stanzas!—

"Hail, beauteous stranger of the grove!
Thou messenger of spring,
Now Heaven repairs thy rural seat,
And woods thy welcome sing.

"What time the daisy decks the green,
Thy certain voice we hear;
Hast thou a star to guide thy path,
Or mark the rolling year?

* * * *

"The school-boy, wandering through the wood
To pull the primrose gay,
Starts thy curious voice to hear
And imitates thy lay.

"Sweet bird, thy bower is ever green,
Thy sky is ever clear;
Thou hast no sorrow in thy song,
No winter in thy year."

This injudicious proposal is, of course, American!

notes of the cuckoo as coming in a mysterious way from a cabalistic object. In his "Stanzas on the Power of Sound," he says—

> "Shout, cuckoo! let the vernal soul
> Go with thee to the frozen zone."

Once we find a reference to the cuckoo flying and singing—

> "From the neighbouring vales
> The cuckoo, straggling up the hill tops,
> Shouteth faint tidings of some gladder place."

The cuckoo is again mentioned as "shouting" in Wordsworth's poem "The Echo"—

> "Yes, it was the mountain echo,
> Solitary, clear, profound,
> Answering to the *shouting* cuckoo,
> Giving to her sound for sound."

Throughout we have but a repetition of—

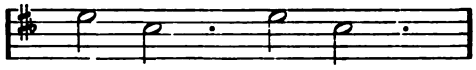
> "The cuckoo's sovereign cry,"

which

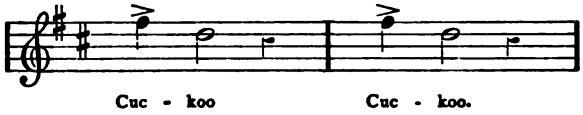
> "Fills all the hollow of the sky."

John Heywood, as early as 1587, pointed out that the cuckoo begins to sing early in the season with the interval of a minor third, then proceeds to a major third, next to a fourth, then a fifth, after which its voice breaks, without attaining a minor sixth. As Mr. Harting remarks, the cuckoo may be said to have done much for musical science, because from this bird has been derived the minor scale, the origin of which has puzzled

many, the cuckoo's couplet being the minor third sung downwards. Kircher, however, in his "Musurgia Universalis" gives it thus:—



In Gardener's "Music of Nature" it is rendered—




A friend of Gilbert White's found upon trial that the note of the cuckoo varies in different individuals. About Selborne Wood he discovered they were mostly in D. He heard two sing together, the one in D, the other in D sharp, which made a very disagreeable duet. He afterwards heard one in D sharp, and some in C, about Wolmer Forest.

Gungl, in his "Cuckoo Galop," gives the note as B natural and G sharp. Dr. Arne in his music to the cuckoo's song in *Love's Labour's Lost*, gives it as C natural and G.

We naturally love the cuckoo's voice because it is a cry of vernal hours; it is as a spring visitant that the poets know the bird.

Wordsworth's second ode "To the Cuckoo" tells us of the cuckoo as an imperishable voice that arrives to gladden the heart of a sick man after the long, dreary months of winter.

"Not the whole warbling grove in concert heard
When sunshine follows shower, the breast can thrill
Like the first summons, cuckoo! of thy bill,
With its twin notes inseparably paired.
The captive, mid damp vaults unsunned, unaired,
Measuring the periods of his lonely doom,
That cry can reach; and to the sick man's room
Sends gladness, by no languid smile declared.
The lordly eagle-race through hostile search
May perish; time may come when never more
The wilderness shall hear the lion roar;
But long as cock shall crow from household perch
To rouse the dawn, soft gales shall speed thy wing,
And thy erratic voice be faithful to the spring!"

As an "erratic voice" that is "faithful to the spring" we find the cuckoo referred to time after time.

Akenside has written a fine ode to the cuckoo which runs thus:—

"O rustic herald of the spring!
At length in yonder woody vale,
Fast by the brook I hear thee sing;
And, studious of thy homely tale,
Amid the vespers of the grove,
Amid the chanting choir of love,
Thy safe responses hail.

"The time has been when I have frown'd
To hear thy voice the woods invade;
And while the solemn accents drown'd
Some sweeter poet of the shade,
Thus, thought I, thus the sons of care,
Some constant youth, or generous fair,
With dull advice upbraid.

"I said, 'While Philomela's song
Proclaims the passion of the grove,
It ill becomes a cuckoo's tongue
Her charming language to reprove.'
Alas, how much a lover's ear
Hates all the sober truth to hear,
The sober truth of love!

"When hearts are in each other blest,
When naught but lofty faith can rule
The nymph's and swain's consenting breast,
How cuckoo-like in Cupid's school
With store of grave prudential saws
On fortune's pow'r and custom's laws,
Appears each friendly fool!

"Yet think betimes, ye gentle train!
Whom love, and hope, and fancy sway,
Who ev'ry harsher care disdain,
Who by the morning judge of day,—
Think that, in April's fairest hours,
To warbling shades and painted flow'rs
The cuckoo joins his lay."

Cuckoo literature is stocked with vernal references. Besides the one just quoted there exist such as—

"The cuckoo is singing when springtime is here."
*Cook.*

"Come and hear the cuckoo sing,
Come and breathe the breath of spring."
*Mackay.*

"At last they heard the foolish cuckoo sing,
Whose note proclaim'd the holy day of spring."
*Dryden.*

"The merry cuckoo, messenger of spring."

*Spenser.*

And

"Wand'ring at return of May,
Catch the first cuckoo's vernal lay."

*Warton.*

But better than any one of these representative quotations are those sweet lines written by the author of "The Solitary Reaper"—

"Such thrilling voice was never heard
In springtime from the cuckoo bird;"

or

"Not for his delight
The vernal cuckoo shouted."*

There exists in various parts along the east coast a rhymed proverb—

"Cuckoo oats and woodcock hay,
Make the farmer run away,"†

which to some degree sums up the poets' cuckoo in two lines. Like the farmer, they know nothing about its oppressive transgressions against Nature, but they do know the bird as a pleasing spring item—as an inseparable part of spring, in fact.

When the cuckoo first appears it is welcomed with

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* "The Excursion."

† That is, if the spring is so backward that the cuckoo is heard when oats are sown, and the autumn so wet that woodcocks come over before the eddish hay is cut, the farmer must suffer great loss.

intense gladness, but presently its notes begin to accloy, and then we hear the very poets, who once rejoiced at its cry, saying such offending things as—

"The cuckoo, ever telling of one tale."

"Linnets with unnumber'd notes,
And the cuckoo-bird with two."

"The cuckoo, away in the thicket,
Is giving his two old notes."

"The same dull note."

And

"The cuckoo chants, as though he were proud
Of his quaint unchanging measure."

In the reign of Henry III., the following ballad, which is considered to be the earliest in the English language now extant, was written :—

| | |
|---|---|
| "Sumer is icumen in, | "Summer is coming in, |
| Lhudè sing cuccu; | Loud sing cuckoo; |
| Groweth sed and bloweth med, | The seed groweth and the mead bloweth, |
| And springeth the wdè'nu; | And sprouts the wood now, |
| Sing cuccu. | Sing cuckoo. |
| Awe bleteth after lomb, | The ewe bleats after the lamb, |
| Lhouth after calvè cu; | The cow lows after the calf; |
| Bulluc sterteth, buckè verteth, | The bullock starts, the buck verts, |
| Murie sing cuccu; | Merrily sing cuckoo; |
| Cuccu, cuccu; | Cuckoo, cuckoo; |
| Wel singes thu cuccu, | Well singest thou cuckoo, |
| Ne swik thu never nu." | Mayest thou never cease." |

This song is preserved among the Harleian MSS., No. 978, and is remarkable for being accompanied with

musical notes, and as being the oldest sample of English secular music. It not only affords a curious example of the alterations which our language has undergone since the reign of Henry III., but it is remarkably valuable because it shows the caustic conservativeness of the poets' minds.

When will another Wordsworth arise and tell us something fresh about the bird that the blind man knows by its *bad* voice? But here I leave this interesting violator of that one great dictate which binds the world in harmony. Here, at a fit place surely, I leave to the reader's notice a creature which possesseth neither patience, kindness, generosity, humility, courtesy, unselfishness, good temper, nor guilelessness; a bird which does not possess a single element which is essential to love; a little monster who commits murder the very day he is given liberty if not sight; and yet a bird which has not only encouraged Wordsworth to re-write Chaucer's lengthy poem, in which that poet makes the cuckoo and nightingale maintain a fantastic discussion, but write of it at Laverna, when his hearing is dulled with age:—

"List!—'twas the Cuckoo. O with what delight
Heard I that voice! and catch it now, though faint,
Far off and faint, and melting into air,
Yet not to be mistaken. Hark again!
Those louder cries give notice that the bird,
Although invisible as Echo's self,
Is wheeling hitherward. Thanks, happy creature,
For this unthought-of greeting!

"While allured
From vale to hill, from hill to vale led on,
We have pursued, through various lands, a long
And pleasant course; flower after flower has blown,
Embellishing the ground that gave them birth
With aspects novel to my sight; but still
Most fair, most welcome, when they drank the dew
In a sweet fellowship with kinds beloved,
For old remembrance sake. And oft—where spring
Displayed her richest blossoms among files
Of orange-trees bedecked with glowing fruit
Ripe for the hand, or under a thick shade
Of ilex, or, if better suited to the hour,
The lightsome olive's twinkling canopy—
Oft have I heard the nightingale and thrush
Blending as in a common English grove
Their love-songs; but, where'er my feet might roam,
Whate'er assemblages of new and old,
Strange and familiar, might beguile the way,
A gratulation from that vagrant voice
Was wanting,—and most happily till now.
For see, Laverna! mark the far-famed pile,
High on the brink of that precipitous rock,
Implanted like a fortress, as in truth
It is, a Christian fortress, garrisoned
In faith and hope, and dutiful obedience,
By a few monks, a stern society,
Dead to the world and scorning earth-born joys.
Nay—though the hopes that drew, the fears that drove,
St. Francis, far from man's resort, to abide
Among these steril heights of Apennine,
Bound him, nor, since he raised yon house, have ceased
To bind his spiritual progeny, with rules
Stringent as flesh can tolerate and live;
His milder genius (thanks to the good God
That made us) over those severe restraints
Of mind, that dread heart-freezing discipline,

Doth sometimes here predominate, and works
By unsought means for gracious purposes;
For earth through heaven, for heaven, by changeful earth,
Illustrated, and mutually endeared.

"Rapt though he were above the power of sense,
Familiarly, yet out of the cleansed heart
Of that once sinful being overflowed
On sun, moon, stars, the nether elements,
And every shape of creature they sustain,
Divine affections; and with beast and bird
(Stilled from afar—such marvel story tells—
By casual outbreak of his passionate words,
And from their own pursuits in field or grove
Drawn to his side by look or act of love
Humane, and virtue of his innocent life)
He wont to hold companionship so free,
So pure, so fraught with knowledge and delight,
As to be likened in his followers' minds
To that which our first parents, ere the fall
From their high state darkened the earth with fear,
Held with all kinds in Eden's blissful bowers.

"Then question not that, 'mid the austere band,
Who breathe the air he breathed, tread where he trod,
Some true partakers of his loving spirit
Do still survive, and, with whose gentle hearts
Consorted, others, in the power, the faith,
Of a baptized imagination, prompt
To catch from Nature's humblest monitors
Whate'er they bring of impulses sublime.

"Thus sensitive must be the monk, though pale
With fasts, with vigils worn, depressed by years,
Whom in a sunny glade I chanced to see,
Upon a pine-tree's storm-uprooted trunk,
Seated alone, with forehead skyward raised,
Hands clasped above the crucifix he wore
Appended to his bosom, and lips closed
By the joint pressure of his musing mood

And habit of his vow. That ancient man—
Nor haply less the brother whom I marked,
As we approached the convent gate, aloft
Looking far forth from his aerial cell,
A young ascetic—poet, hero, sage,
He might have been, lover belike he was—
If they received into a conscious ear
The notes whose first faint greeting startled me,
Whose sedulous iteration thrilled with joy
My heart—may have been moved like me to think,
Ah! not like me who walk in the world's ways,
On the great Prophet, styled *the Voice of one*
*Crying amid the wilderness*, and given,
Now that their snows must melt, their herbs and flowers
Revive, their obstinate winter pass away,
That awful name to thee, thee, simple cuckoo,
Wandering in solitude, and evermore
Foretelling and proclaiming, ere thou leave
This thy last haunt beneath Italian skies
To carry thy glad tidings over heights
Still loftier, and to climes more near the pole.
Voice of the desert, fare-thee-well; sweet bird!
If that substantial title please thee more,
Farewell!—but go thy way, no need hast thou
Of a good wish sent after thee; from bower
To bower as green, from sky to sky as clear,
Thee gentle breezes waft—or airs, that meet
Thy course, and sport around thee, softly fan—
Till night, descending upon hill and vale,
Grants to thy mission a brief term of silence,
And folds thy pinions up in blest repose."

# Book III.

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# STRIGES.

*BOOK III.*

# STRIGES.

## OWLS.*

"Deep night, dark night, the silence of the night,
* * * * *
The time when screech-owls cry and ban-dogs howl."

*Shakespeare.*

"While 'mid the fern-brake sleep the doe,
And owls alone are waking."

*Wordsworth.*

"Yet helped by genius—untired comforter!
The presence even of a stuffed owl for her

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* As several of Wordsworth's references to owls speak of them as "hooting" or curring, while others mention the bird as "screeching" or screaming, and because no owl has been mentioned by its specific name, except such names as "screech-owl," I have considered it advisable to speak of the barn-owl (*Strix flammea*) and the brown owls (*Asio otus, accipitrinus;* and *Strix aluco*) under the collective title of "owls," and have not attempted in any way to discriminate the species particularly mentioned in the poet's writings.

Can cheat the time; sending her fancy out
To ivied castles and to moonlight skies,
Though he can neither stir a plume, nor shout,
Nor veil, with restless film, his staring eyes."

*Wordsworth.*

IN pages which manifest considerable erudition the author of "The Poets' Birds" traces the bards' antipathy to owls home to an absonant hatred they have of the darkened hours of the night. Nearly every poet, poetess, and poetaster has written in praise of the glorious light, and almost, as I might figuratively say, in the same line has versified the darkness as something altogether too terrible—too awful. Why those who have written down their "emotions recollected in tranquillity"* have spoken of darkness as such a horror, as something absolutely uncouth, has never been satisfactorily expounded. As a rule, these purely poetic horrors of the night have been used as a preposterous antithesis against the happinesses of the day, and, as Mr. Robinson points out, this has been done with a poetic disregard that the eventide was a time blessed by the Creator, and further, the one occasion when Egypt was entirely without guilt in all her length and breadth was when she was plunged into universal darkness! No doubt in night Mr. Robinson has found the primary basis on which to build a hypothetical explanation, but has he overlooked myths which must have told against the reputation of the poetical owl?

* Wordsworth's definition of poetry.

The poets cannot, any more than prose writers, forget the disgraced Nyctimene, who nearly brought about her own murder by the hand of Nycteus, her father, by her detestable criminal amours. It is impossible for the result of a myth like this to die, howbeit its historical records may have left the pages of print years—ages—ago. Though this is but a myth, the harm it has done to owl literature in time past, and the harm it will do in time to come, is incalculable.

Besides the myth which tells the tale of incestuous Nyctimene, there is extant another legend, which may be found in Staunton's Edition of Shakespeare's Plays: this has reference to a tradition still current in some parts of England. "Our Saviour went into a baker's shop where they were baking and asked for some bread to eat. The mistress of the shop immediately put a piece of dough into the oven to bake for him, but was reprimanded by her daughter, who, insisting that the piece of dough was too large, reduced it considerably in size. The dough, however, immediately afterwards began to swell, and presently became of an enormous size, whereupon the baker's daughter cried out, 'Wheugh! wheugh! wheugh!' which owl-like noise, it is said, probably induced our Saviour, for her wickedness, to transform her into that bird."

These are the kind of legends which ring a death-knell to the reputation of any innocent bird. Long after we have forgotten them we dislike—yet we don't know why we dislike—the victim of their once exist-

ence. Moreover, Ascalaphus once enraged Proserpine —who held the owl as sacred—so much that she sprinkled water on the offending informant's head, and he, poor wretch, because he saw his ward gather a pomegranate from a tree and eat it in the Elysian Fields, was transformed into a staring owl, forever to feed while others slept, forever to see no longer in the hours of light.

Again, did not even mighty Rome, which could boast of private soldiers such as Horatius, undergo a solemn lustration in consequence of an owl having accidentally strayed into the capitol? Even the Romans, warlike as they were, viewed the round-eyed owl with detestation and dread! In Egypt it was the symbol of judicial death, the supreme power of law. In the East it is still sacred to the Ganges, and the bird on which Rahu rides.

Being decorous that the queen of the heavens should take the shape of some small and vulgar bird, and one whose reign by night was equal with that of the eagle's by day, Juno selected the likeness of an owl in contradistinction to that of the eagle, which her brother Jupiter was able to assume.

How the owl came to be so abhorred by the poets I have no power of either explaining or guessing, for in contradiction to what I have just related, it should not be forgot that the Athenians, the adorers of the highest arts, regarded this bird with strange veneration and considered it as not only the favourite of Minerva, but

the very image of wisdom. Wordsworth has the most exquisite reference to the bird's association with ancient Greece—

> "In classic ages men perceived a soul
> Of sapience in thy aspect; headless owl!
> Thee Athens reverenced in the studious grove;
> And, near the golden sceptre grasped by Jove,
> His eagle's favourite perch, while round him sate
> The Gods revolving the decrees of Fate,
> Thou, too, wert present at Minerva's side—
> Hark to that second larum! far and wide
> The elements have heard, and rock and cave replied."

The true beauty of these lines may be seen when we compare them to such as Pope's—

> "Thro' twilight ages hunt th' Athenian fowl,
> Which Chalcis' gods, and mortals call an owl";

Armstrong's—

> "Sly as the Athenian bird, she shuns the day";

or Butler's—

> "At this deep Sidrophel look'd wise,
> And, staring round with owl-like eyes,
> He put his face into a posture
> Of sapience, and began to bluster;
> For having three times shook his head,
> To stir his wit up, thus he said:
> 'Art has no mortal enemies
> Next ignorance, but owls and geese;
> * * * *
> . . . Those Athenian sceptic owls
> That will not credit their own souls,
> Or any science understand,
> Beyond the reach of eye or hand."

Be the poets' repugnance of the owl sensible or not, in ancient pharmacopœia the owl appears to have been medicine of no puny capabilities. It was used wholesale in the composition of Medea's gruel, and the hateful old witch Canidia made use of the feathers in her gutteral incantations.

The second witch in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* proposes as ingredients for the charmed pot—

> "Fillet of a fenny snake,
> In the cauldron boil and bake;
> Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
> Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
> Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
> Lizard's leg, and owlet's wing." *

And these were to be boiled until they bubbled—

> "For a charm of powerful trouble,
> Like a hell broth."

We live in a time of rapid progress, a time when it is impossible to imagine the damage there is in a moping barn-owl, much less in a moping barn-owl's silent wing. Yet who knows when the curious concoction was properly prepared, "thick and slab," what distress it caused!

If in the time of Ovid, and before, the owl or a portion of the owl, was looked upon with superstition, the people of those days were no more cowardly than the peasant

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* Compare

> "The scrich-owle's eggs and feathers black,
> The bloud of the frogge, and the bone in his back,
> I have been getting; and made of his skin
> A purse, to keep Sir Cranion in."

classes of to-day, for in the nineteenth century nothing more terror-striking exists than the—

> "Birds of omen, dark and foul,
> Night-crow, raven, bat, and owl." *

Were I to select out of these four the most poetically frightful, I should unhesitatingly choose the last, for the bards have ever stigmatised the poor, harmless owl as an "obscure," "ominous," "fearful," "fatal," "grave," "solemn," "bashful," "sad," "lone," "sobbing," "wailing," "dull," "moody," "sullen," "dismal," "hoarse," "grim," "boding," "spectral," "ghostly," "ghastly," "bird of night."

Shakespeare introduces an owl in the most dreadful assumed scene in the whole of his tragic writing. Blood has scarcely covered the murderer's hands before Lady Macbeth hears the doleful cry of an owl, whose hoot echoes through the air and pierces her listening ear. While her lord is committing the most atrocious crime against his God, now starting, now looking round, anon glancing a moment at his hateful work and then at his bloody fingers, anywhere but at the set face of his victim, his Lady hears the owl and says—

> "Hark!—Peace! It was the owl that shriek'd,
> The fatal bell-man which gives the stern'st good night."

Then in rushes the murderer, while yet his person denotes crime, exclaiming as he enters—

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* Scott: "Gaelic Legend."

"I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?"

To this fearsome question Lady Macbeth answers—

"I heard the owl scream."

Later on, however, her imagination seems to have got the better of her remembrance, and the bird that once "shrieked" is spoken of as—

"The *obscure bird* clamour'd the live-long night."

In *Julius Cæsar* the owl foretells the crime of Casca—

"Yesterday the *bird of night* did sit,
Even at noon-day, upon the market-place,
Hooting and shrieking."

"Pliny says, "The scritch-owle betokeneth alwaies some heavie newes, is most excrable and accursed in the presages of publicke affaires. He keepeth ever in the deserts; and loveth not only such unpeopled places, but also that are horribly hard of accesse. In somme, he is the verie monster of the night, neither crying nor singing out cleare, but uttering a certaine heavie grone of dolefull moning. And, therefore, if he be seen either within cities or otherwise abroad in any place, it is not for good, but prognosticateth some fearfull misfortune."

This is the source from which the poets evidently have constructed such lines as—

"A greedy grave,
That still for carrion carcases doth crave;
On top whereof aye dwelt the ghastly owle,
Shrieking his balefull note, which ever drave
Far from that haunt all other chearefull fowle;
And all about it wandering ghostes did wayle and howle."

*Spenser.*

And

"Down in a dark and solitary vale
Where the curst screech-owl sings her fatal tale."

*Chatterton.*

But we can pretty well measure the hideousness of the owl's song by Don Juan—

"Of all the horrid, hideous notes of woe,
Sadder than owl songs or the midnight blast,
Is that portentous phrase, 'I told you so.'"

It is said that if a dog howl under a dying man's window he is sure to die that night. This may be founded upon a truth, inasmuch as a dog's keen nose might detect the strong odours which often precede death. But an owl that journeys at night in search of prey, even if it were able to smell these odours, would surely have common sense enough not to scream and thus make known its whereabouts. Wordsworth has referred to the owl as a bird of ill-omen albeit he knew such legendary evil-foreboding to be out of touch with Nature, for he says—

"Yet rather would I instantly decline
To the traditionary sympathies
Of the most rustic ignorance, and take
A fearful apprehension from the owl
Or death-watch."

In his poem the "Waggoner"—

"'Ay,' said the tar, 'through fair and foul,
But save us from yon screeching owl."
* * * * *
"'Yon screech owl,' says the sailor turning
Back to his former cause of mourning,
'Yon owl! pray God that all be well!
'Tis worse than any funeral bell;
As sure as I've the gift of sight,
We shall be meeting ghosts to-night!'"

But Benjamin sensibly replies,

"This whip shall lay
A thousand if they cross our way.
I know that wanton's noisy station,
I know him and his occupation;
The jolly bird hath learned his cheer
On the banks of Windermere;
Where a tribe of them make merry,
Mocking the man that keeps the ferry,
Halloing from an open boat,
The tricks he learned at Windermere
This vagrant owl is playing here;
That is the worst of his employment;
He's in the height of his enjoyment!"

In "A Morning Exercise" besides of the "blithe ravens" which "croak of death," we read—

"And when the owl
Tries his two voices for a favourite strain,
Tu-whit-tu-whoo! the unsuspecting fowl
Forebodes mishap, or seems but to complain;
Fancy, intent to harass and annoy
Can thus pervert the evidence of joy."

It is as an augur of death and foul diseases and terrible

mishaps that we usually read of the poor owl in poetry, yet, instead of being a predictor of death or anything else at all, on the contrary the owl is one of the most useful servants to man. In the year 1862 Dr. Altum imposed upon himself the task of investigating the destructive abilities of our three commonest species of owls, and his communication to the German Ornithologists' Society proves beyond doubt how deeply indebted every farmer is to silent Ascalaphus—

| | No. of Pellets Examined. | Remains Found. | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Bats. | Rats. | Mice. | Voles. | Shrews. | Moles. | Birds. | Beetles. |
| Tawny owl . | 210 | — | 6 | 42 | 296 | 33 | 48 | 18* | 48§ |
| Long-eared owl . . | 25 | — | — | 6 | 35 | — | — | 2† | — |
| Barn owl . . | 706 | 16 | 3 | 237 | 693 | 1590 | — | 22‡ | — |

* Tree-creeper, 1 yellow bunting, 1 wagtail, 15 small species undetermined.
† Species of Titmouse. ‡ 19 sparrows, 1 greenfinch, 2 swifts.
§ Besides a countless number of cockchafers.

We should learn from this table to appreciate Shelley's lines—

"Sad Aziola! many an eventide
Thy music I have heard
By wood and stream, meadow and mountain-side,
And field and marshes wide,
Such as nor voice, nor lute, nor wind, nor bird
The soul ever stirred;
Unlike and far sweeter than them all.
Sad Aziola! from that moment I
Loved thee and thy sad cry."

We should sympathize with such lines as these, written by Burns—

> "Shut out, lone bird! from all thy feathered train,
> To tell thy sorrows to the unheeding gloom;
> No friend to pity when thou dost complain,
> Grief all thy thought, and solitude thy home.
> Sing on, sad mourner! I will bless thy strain,
> And, pleased, in sorrow listen to thy song:
> Sing on, sad mourner! to the night complain,
> While the lone echo wafts thy notes along."

We should learn to listen more attentively to—

> "The tremulous sob of the complaining owl."

To understand how little Wordsworth appreciated the idea of an evil-prophesying owl we have only to read his poem, the "Idiot Boy." This poem opens with—

> "'Tis eight o'clock, a clear March night,
> The moon is up, the sky is blue,
> The owlet, in the moonlight air,
> Shouts from nobody knows where;
> He lengthens out his lonely shout,
> Halloo! halloo! a long halloo!"

Further on we have the owlet answering the Idiot' "burr," after which we read—

> "The owlets through the long blue night
> Are shouting to each other still:
> Fond lovers! yet not quite hob-nob
> They lengthen out the tremulous sob,
> That echoes far from hill to hill."

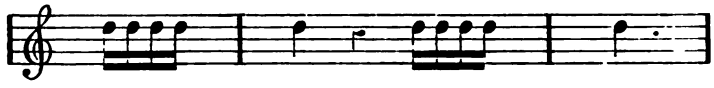
And three verses from the close we read—

"The owls have hardly sung their last,
* * * * *
The owls have hooted all night long,
And with the owls began my song,
And with the owls must end."

It must be admitted that here the owls did their level-best as prophets of death, if their presence and voice alone prophesies, to bring about the end of "Johnny," the idiot lad, yet their screams seem to have had little or no effect, for "Johnny" returned to his mother, Betty Foy, safely, to answer her questions "like a traveller bold"—

"The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold."

In Gardener's "Music of Nature" the note of the brown owl is thus rendered :—



Mr. Colquhoun says that the music of the white or barn owl is a little different from that of the brown owls. It is only one prolonged cadence, lower and not so mournful as that of the tawny fellow.

It would appear that owls do not keep to one note. A friend of Gilbert White's remarked that most of his owls hooted in B flat, but that one went almost half a note below A. The pipe by which he tried their notes was a common half-crown pitchpipe. A neighbour, also, of the Selborne naturalist, who was said to have

a nice ear, remarked that the owls about Selborne hooted in three different keys, in G flat (or F sharp), in B flat, and A flat. He heard two hooting to each other, the one in A flat, the other in B flat.*

The owl has been called the great "bug-a-boo" of the birds, but what that means only an American can properly explain. Yet whether his midnight uncanny cry is the sign of coming misfortune or not, he is often looked upon by the sober as a jolly fellow after all.

"The lark is but a bumpkin fowl;
He sleeps in his nest till morn;
But my blessing upon the jolly owl
That all night blows his horn,"

says one poet, and Shakespeare has a quaint and characteristic song in the last scene of *Love's Labour's Lost:*—

"When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail;
When blood is nipp'd, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
To-who;
Tu-whit, to-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

"When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marian's nose looks red and raw;

* See Harting's "Ornithology of Shakespeare."

When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
To-who;
Tu-whit, to-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot."

Tennyson too, has a song which bears a slight resemblance to Shakespeare's, in which he pictures the white owl sitting in the belfry when "the dew is cold upon the ground."

Wordsworth's other references to the voice of the owl are such as, "the hooting owl," or—

"The owls in tuneful concert strive."

Instead of disliking, Wordsworth, like Burns and Shelley, seems to have loved the moping owl's harsh hoot, for once, as I have already pointed out, he wrote—

"You may love a screaming owl,"

And again he says—

"I'll teach my boy the sweetest things,
I'll teach him how the owlet sings."

A question in the life-history of the owl is raised by the following passage—

"There was a boy; ye knew him well, ye cliffs
And islands of Winander! many a time,
At evening, when the earliest star began
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone,
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake;
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands

Pressed closely palm to palm and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
That they might answer him. And they would shout
Across the watery vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud
Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild
Of mirth and jocund din!"

Not long ago I read in a paper that someone went to see the famous Dove Cottage, the birthplace of some of Wordsworth's finest poems. The visitor, on arriving at Wordsworth's little room, asked "Is this, then, his study?" To which the servant replied "This is his room, sir, but his study was in the fields." The lines I have just quoted form a beautiful word-picture of Wordsworth by himself, who writes of imaginary sublimity as follows—

"A beechen bowl,
A maple dish, my furniture should be;
Crisp, yellow leaves my bed; the hooting owl
My night watch. Nor should e'er the crested fowl
From throp or vill his Matins sound for me,
Tired of the world and all its industry."

The owls' flight is swallow-like, it rises in the air and then suddenly sweeps over the surface of the earth; as White says, it—

"Skims round the grassy mead."

Thus is its flight described by the poet who wrote so beautifully about the cuckoo—

"The darksome lawn
Brushed by the owlet's wing."

While many poets have introduced its soul-piercing scream into poetry, comparatively few have endeavoured to localize the owl, few have mentioned the—

"Rifted barns,
Where no one dwells but the wide-staring owl
And the owl's prey."

Barry Cornwall's "Owl" is perhaps the finest poetic account of Nyctimene's home we get—

"In the hollow tree, in the old grey tower,
The spectral owl doth dwell;
Dull, hated, despised, in the sunshine hour,*
But at dusk, he's abroad and well!
Not a bird of the forest e'er mates with him,
All mock him outright by day;
But at night, when the woods grow still and dim,
The boldest will shrink away!
Oh! when the night falls and roosts the fowl,
Then, then is the reign of the horned owl!

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* John Burroughs says of the owl, "His appearance by day is hailed by shouts of alarm and derision from nearly every bird that flies, from crows down to sparrows. They swarm about him like flies, and literally mob him back into his dusky retreat. Silence is as the breath of his nostrils to him, and the uproar that greets him when he emerges into open day seems to alarm and confuse him as it does the pickpocket when everybody cries thief." The appearance of an owl by day is by some considered ominous:—

"The owl by day,
If he arise, is mocked and wondered at."
*Shakespeare.*

"And the owl hath a bride who is fond and bold,
And loveth the wood's deep gloom;
And with eyes like the shine of the moonstone cold,
She awaiteth her ghostly groom!
Not a feather she moves, not a carol she sings,
As she waits in her tree, so still;
But when her heart heareth his flapping wings,
She hoots out her welcome shrill!
Oh! when the moon shines, and dogs do howl,
Then, then is the joy of the horned owl!

"Mourn not for the owl, nor his gloomy plight!
The owl hath his share of good;
If a prisoner he be in the broad daylight,
He is lord of the dark green wood!
Nor lonely the bird, nor his ghastly mate,
They are each unto each a pride;
Thrice fonder, perhaps, since a strange dark fate
Hath rent from all beside!
So, when the night falls, and dogs do howl,
Sing, ho! for the reign of the horned owl!
We know not alway
Who are kings by day,
But the king of the night is the bold brown owl!"

Graham says—

"Against this evil, let the screeching owl
A sacred bird be held; protect her nest,
Whether in neighbouring crag, within the reach
Of venturous boy, it hang, or in the rent
Of some old echoing tower, where her sad plaint
The livelong night she moans, save when she skims,
Prowling, along the ground, or through your barn
Her nightly round performs; unwelcome guest,
Whose meteor-eyes shoot horror through the dark,
And numb the tiny revellers* with dread."

* Mice.

Butler, in his Hudibras, speaks of—

"An owl, that in a barn
Sees a mouse creeping in the corn,
Sits still, and shuts his round blue eyes,
As if he slept, until he spies
The little beast within his reach,
Then starts, and seizes on the wretch."

Wordsworth tells us that—

"The owl of evening and the woodland fox
For their abode the shrines of Waltham choose."

But besides these lines we find a beautiful word-limn of the owl's retreat amongst his miscellaneous poems—

"Sound is there none at which the faintest heart
Might leap, the weakest nerve of superstition start;
Save when the owlet's unexpected scream
Pierces the ethereal vault; and 'mid the gleam
Of unsubstantial imagery, the dream,
From the hushed vale's realities, transferred
To the still lake, the imaginative bird
Seems, 'mid inverted mountains, not unheard.

"Grave Creature! whether, while the moon shines bright
On thy wings opened wide for smoothest flight,
Thou art discovered in a roofless tower,
Rising from what may once have been a lady's bower:
Or spied where thou sitt'st moping in thy mew
At the dim centre of a churchyard yew;
Or, from a rifted crag or ivy tod
Deep in a forest, thy secure abode,
Thou giv'st, for pastime's sake by shriek or shout,
A puzzling notice of thy whereabout;

"May the night never come, the day be seen,
When I shall scorn thy voice or mock thy mien!"

# Book IV.

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# ACCIPITRES.

*BOOK IV.*

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VULTURE—GOLDEN EAGLE—WHITE-TAILED EAGLE—OSPREY—FALCON—KESTREL—SPARROW-HAWK—KITE—BUZZARD.

## THE VULTURE.

WORDSWORTH'S reference to the Vulture (*Gyps fulvus* or *Neophron percnopterus* ?) brings to our notice the hateful tortures of Clymene's son. It is valuable inasmuch as it is original, and distinguishes the vulture from any other bird—

> "Say why
> That ancient story of Prometheus chained?
> The vulture,* the inexhaustible repast
> Drawn from his vitals? Say what meant the woes
> By Tantalus entailed upon his race,

* According to some authorities it is the eagle that drew the inexhaustible repast from the liver of Prometheus. George M'Cullock in his Academy picture (1891), of the fate of Prometheus, has painted Hercules shooting the eagle.

And the dark sorrows of the line of Thebes?
Fictions in form, but in their substance truths,
Tremendous truths! familiar to the men
Of long-past times; nor obsolete in ours."

We all know more or less about Prometheus; we ought to sympathize with him. It is to him, legend tells us we should not forget, mankind are indebted for the invention of numerous useful arts. It was he who taught us the use of plants—their physical power. From him, so myth says, we received the knowledge of taming horses and different animals. But above all do we not owe him an unpayable debt for his modelling capabilities; for Apollodorus tells us that with clay he made the first man and woman who ever trod the earth, and gave them animation by means of the fire he had stolen from heaven? What tears should suffuse the eyes when we think of Prometheus, our benefactor, miserably tied on the summit of Mount Caucasus by Vulcan, there for 30,000 years to have his liver pecked by a vulture! Though he ridiculed the gods in a shameful way, and deceived the mighty Jupiter himself; though he sacrificed two bulls and filled their hides, one with the flesh, and the other with the bones, and duped the father of the gods, the punishment of taking fire away from earth was unjustifiably severe. Besides, Jupiter was not above attempting a trick himself. He ordered Mercury to make a woman of clay, and after giving her life, sent her to the wily Prometheus, with a box of the richest and most

valuable presents which she had received from the gods. Jupiter must have been a strangely peevish Shah, for when he found his Pandora was taken no notice of he flew into a towering rage, and the offending Prometheus was committed to the height of Caucasus and the beak of the insatiable vulture. The delivery by Hercules is, indeed, the redeeming feature of the myth. But the bare recognition of a myth, the substance of which nearly every one knows, if he is not able to imagine its fundamental teaching, may be termed a poor acknowledgment of "Pharaoh's Hen" — the "White Crow" of Capetown. This is magnified if we look upon the bird* as an emblem of the ancient Turk, as the crescent of the modern Ottoman Empire. It is, indeed, but a stiff nod to such a warlike creature as—

> "That black vulture, which with dreadful wing
> O'ershadows half the earth, whose dismal sight
> Frightened the muses from their native spring,
> Already stoops, and flags with weary wing."

It may be termed a "paltry line" if we think of the bird as the faithful and loving *Racham* (gier-eagle) of the Scriptures, as the bird which never parts company from its spouse.

But, forsooth, of the vulture—the Egyptian vulture—that some of us see and more of us hear about to-day, it is enough. Where is the poetry in a bird which

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* The black vulture.

gorges itself so that it can scarcely trundle its weighty carcass from beneath the donkey's feet of Cairo? Where is the poetry in a habit which forms the ground-work of the worst wishes even Falstaff could give vent to when in a bad humour?

"Let vultures gripe thy guts."

## THE GOLDEN EAGLE.

SIR WILLIAM JARDINE, who added his contributions to ornithology during the years which fell between 1848 and 1852, speaks of the precipices of Westmorland and Cumberland having once boasted the distinction of possessing eyries of the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaëtos*). Writing in 1838, Sir William says—"Upon the wild ranges of the Scottish border one or two pairs used to breed, but their nest has not been known for twenty years, though a straggler in winter sometimes is yet seen amidst the defiles"; and Mr. Robert Gray, in his "Birds of the West of Scotland," states that, though looked upon throughout the country generally as a rarity, it is, from its habit of wandering in the autumn, frequently seen in the lowlands.

In the works of Wordsworth, frequent allusions are made to an eagle, but the simple word "eagle" gives the reader but little chance of identifying the particular species the poet indicates. Indeed, so vague is the word occasionally, that it is absolutely impossible to allege with any assurance what bird is specifically implied; yet, while reading the poet's works, when such

was the case, I endeavoured mentally to insert that bird—that eagle—which best fitted and adapted itself to the pictured environments.

The eagle, though once horribly put to shame by the impish wren, is the poet's emblem of majesty, but this does not establish our permittance to gather any information regarding such a mighty object from their writings. We have yet to learn, so wretchedly cloudy are their references, which *Aquila* the poets know, whether they know any *Aquila* at all, or whether their knowledge reduces the whole *Falconidæ* down to one species, an eagle, a falcon, or a hawk of their own special invention. Their invariable vagueness would lead us eventually to fit this stigmatising dunce-cap on their verse, and were it not that we generally possess minds which luckily have the quality of binocular perception, which in the case of the poetical eagle commonly inserts the word "golden" before it, we should have been driven ere now to believe that the majority of the poets have not only never seen an eagle, but have never read any scientific treatise which boasts their name.

In Wordsworth's writings it is not so difficult to ascribe the right bird to its right place as in the writings of most poets, for it will be found that the eagle he knows about his home is the white-tailed or sea eagle, which bred almost invariably every year near Keswick and Ulleswater in Dr. Heysham's day, and which, as late as the year 1835, were to be seen going about in pairs.

On the other hand, the majestic eagle which is introduced as a metaphor—

> "Surpassing me in love
> Far as in power the eagle doth the worm,"

known by the Lake poet to exist in Scotland, and recommended to him by its surrounding mythology, is, as a rule, accepted and recognized as the golden eagle—the *Aquila chrysaëtos* of naturalists.

Wordsworth, among other references which point to the regality of the eagle, has two well-known lines, the one is inserted in his "Song at the Feast of Broughton Castle"—

> "The eagle, lord of land and sea,"

the other in his dauntless song of Rob Roy's grave—

> "The eagle, he was lord above."

In his "Memorials of a Tour in Scotland," Wordsworth writes, in that tale of "The Blind Highland Boy," told by the fireside after returning to the Vale of Grasmere, that the lad had many a restless dream—

> "Both when he heard the eagles scream
> And when he heard the torrents roar,
> And heard the water beat the shore
> Near which their cottage stood."

As we peruse these befitting memorials we are shown how this singer of nothing coarse, nothing Byronic or Shelleyian, could find as much pleasure in the glorious scenes of a fresh-lake district as the most unhealthy

minded Mrs. Aphra Behn could find in fresh fields of animal licentiousness and humiliating beastliness. Besides, we read in them the pictures of a poet who is not so ingrafted with the lovely scenery of his own country that he cannot spare a word of praise on the surpassing grandeur of the world that lies beyond that much-contested border. And then again we have in his memorials the duty of every poet—the picturing of those things which only exist, as it were, for the wealthy, only known in print to the poor. Would that every poet had done his work like Wordsworth. Instead, then, of foolishly wasting time reading lies (called poetic licences, but lies of the blackest hue, for they are but semi-truthful), we should read truths—everlasting truths, tremendous truths; and we should have more, we should have a Mediterranean, a Norway, a Scotland, or a Westmorland that we could visit, that we could see in print, obtainable by everyone who could read, too distant for none. Were there more Wordsworths and fewer Byrons, were there more poems like the "Excursion," and fewer like "Venus and Adonis," were there more who could sacrifice the pleasure of penning their personal experiences of disappointment, and what should be shame, and limn that which the Creator has given them to admire, then would the world be a better world, and man better fitted to his surroundings.

In his "To Enterprise," a poem included in his "Memorials of a Tour on the Continent," Wordsworth wrote—

"From rocky fortress in mid air
The flame-eyed eagle oft would'st scare
With infant shout."

These lines, if they indicate the Golden Eagle, should be pleasing to the ear of the ornithologist, for they point directly to the fact that in Wordsworth's day, and even I think I am right in affirming, to-day, some space belonged, and does belong yet, to this imposing bird.

The words "flame-eyed" may be found again in the poet's "Ecclesiastical Sketches."

"Near the *flame-eyed* eagle sits the dove,"

This description of the eagle's iris, which is really either hazel or yellow, is rather imaginary; in fact, rather a painting of a warlike bird than an eagle proper. It would be as absurd, though, to look for acute exactness in a detail so removed from personal penetration, as it would be to ridicule Shakespeare's even more striking supposition that—

"A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind,"

or that—

"An eagle
Hath not so green, so quick, so fair an eye
As Paris hath."

If we would worm out natural facts, and leave alone suppositions, it is easy to find in Wordsworth such notes as point out that Paulinus, who possessed—

"—prominent features like an eagle's beak,"

must have had—

"The soaring eagle's curved beak."

Our golden eagle in plumage resembles, though it differs in the structure of its foot, the *Aquila heliaca* of Savigny, which is held to have been the imperial symbol of arrogant Rome. Indeed, the golden eagle affords us a better representative of the Roman bird than any other eagle we possess in our list, inasmuch as it is grander and more royal looking in its bearings. If we place our bird in the proud position of that eagle which played such a prominent part in ancient history, then, indeed, ought we to be more anxious of its presence, more jealous of its eyrie. If the golden eagle be indeed the same great feathered signification of fortitude that Rome possessed as her legions' emblem, then should we strive with all our might and main to preserve it from destruction. "Many of us," says Hamerton, "have seen eagles, that is, a pair of dots near the brow of some Highland mountain." Fancy those two dots, which Hamerton speaks of as eagles, being the living progeny of ancestors which afforded the Romans a subject for their regal banners! Those two dots up away beyond the mountain, in the empyrean wastes, perhaps are the children of the bird that inspired the ancient kings of Babylon and Persia, of the Ptolemies and Seleucidës, to insert its form in their banners! Imagine, if you can, the part their renowned parents played in history. In the second century

before Christ the eagle became the sole military ensign. After the kings of Babylon the Romans adopted the same representation of an eagle in conjunction with other devices, and later on, whether it was a banner, or, as Florus would have us believe, some small bronze arrangement which could be pulled off the top of a gilt pole, and hid away under a belt, Marius made it the ensign of the legions, and conferred other and humbler devices on the cohorts. Coming more toward our own day we find that it stood with outspread wings commemorative of the Crusades, that the French under the Empire have assumed the same device, that Queen Mary had it for her badge. Then there are those copies of Constantine's strange device, the two-headed eagles of Austria and Russia, signifying double empires. In nearly every church of England the eagle holds the proud position in the lectern, because it is supposed to be the natural enemy of the serpent. Moreover, it is the emblem of St. John the Evangelist, because, like the eagle, he looked on "the sun of glory"; and besides being one of the four figures which made up the cherub, the two testaments are the two outstretched wings of the eagle, and when we learn that the bible is against sin as the eagle is against a serpent we read a new lesson in "Where the carcass is there will the vultures be also." I say our golden eagle may be one and the same bird as this strangely-attractive creature, which encouraged people in ages gone by to use it as their device.

"Aloft, the imperial bird of Rome invokes
Departed ages, shedding where he flew
Loose fragments of wild wailing, that bestrew
The clouds, and thrill the chambers of the rocks,
And into silence hush the timorous flocks,
That, calmly couching while the mighty dew
Moistened each fleece, beneath the twinkling stars
Slept amid that lone camp on Hardknot's height,*
Whose guardians bent the knees to Jove and Mars."†

Further, this feathered creature may have been, as Wordsworth writes, the

" . . . bird that soared with Ganymede."

Mythology on the one hand and natural beauty on the other, would lead us to think the golden eagle was the bird of Jove—that privileged bird of whom Wordsworth says, in his "Evening Voluntaries"—

"Near the golden sceptre grasped by Jove,
His eagle's favourite perch."

Izaak Walton, in his "Compleat Angler," furnishes us with an excellent reason why the eagle is called "Jove's bird." "In the air," says the honest fisherman and falconer, in discoursing on the merits of his recreation with a brother angler, "my troops of hawks soar upon high, and when they are lost in the sight of men, then they attend upon and converse with the gods; therefore I think my eagle is so justly styled Jove's servant in ordinary." What reason have I or any one

* Locally called "Hardknot Castle." † River Duddon.

else to disqualify our sublime bird for the proud post of being the founder of all these ensigns? From being the subject of the myth? From being the ornament of a lectern?

Besides the allusions I have already used to illustrate Wordsworth's acquaintance with eagles, I find in his book, "Yarrow Revisited, and other Poems," three sonnets devoted entirely to eagles—perhaps rather should I say to one eagle and its mosaic eidolan. They refer to some eagle known to the poet in Scotland—most probably a golden eagle discovered at Dunollie Castle, situated in the Bay of Oban. The first sonnet again supplies us with a reference to the "bird of Jove," and it is as follows—

> "Dishonoured Rock and Ruin! that, by law
> Tyrannic, keeps the Bird of Jove embarred,
> Like a lone criminal whose life is spared.
> Vexed is he, and screams loud. The last I saw
> Was on the wing; stooping, he struck with awe
> Man, bird, and beast; then, with a consort paired,
> From a bold headland,* their loved eyrie's guard,
> Flew high above Atlantic waves, to draw
> Light from the fountain of the setting sun.
> Such was this prisoner once; and, when his plumes
> The sea-blast ruffles as the storm comes on,
> Then, for a moment, he, in spirit, resumes
> His rank 'mong free-born creatures that live free,
> His power, his beauty, and his majesty."

Such are the words that the poet, the breath of whose nostrils was freedom, has written of a confined "lord of

* The promontory of Fairhead, county of Antrim.

land and sea." When he first saw the wretched captive he wrote, be it said, in pity and disgust rather than in fear of offending its captors.

On revisiting Dunollie he has not forgotten the site, and thus does he write—

"Not to the clouds, not to the cliff, he flew;
But when a storm, on sea or mountain bred,
Came and delivered him, alone he sped
Into the castle-dungeon's darkest mew.
Now, near his master's house in open view
He dwells, and hears indignant tempests howl,
Kennelled and chained. Ye tame domestic fowl
Beware of him! Thou, saucy cockatoo,
Look to thy plumage and thy life! The roe,
Fleet as the west wind, is for *him* no quarry.
Balanced in ether he will never tarry,
Eyeing the sea's blue depths. Poor bird! even so
Doth man of brother man a creature make
That clings to slavery for its own sad sake."

And it is of a representative of this same eagle he wrote—

"The captive bird was gone;—to cliff or moor
Perchance had flown, delivered by the storm;
Or he had pined, and sunk to feed the worm:
Him found we not; but, close by a tall tower,
There saw, impaved with rude fidelity
Of art mosaic, in a roofless floor,
An eagle with stretched wings, but beamless eye;
An eagle that could neither wail nor soar.
Effigy of the vanished (shall I dare
To call thee so?), symbol of fierce deeds
And of the towering courage, which past times
Rejoiced in—take, what e'er thou be, a share,
Not undeserved, of the memorial rhymes
That animated my way where'er it leads!"

Let critics ridicule his poetry as they think best fit. Let them hold up the bard's knowledge of ornithology and scorn it if they will, but let them remember that the chamois is fitted to its place, that Wordsworth is needed to-day as much as ever he was needed, and that their criticism, though scarcely clever enough to be attractive, may yet be to some—

> "The pressure of a painful thing,
> The lion's sinews, or the eagle's wing."

## THE WHITE-TAILED EAGLE.

WE know from scientific records that the white-tailed Cinereous, or Sea-eagle (*Haliæëtus albicilla*) was, during Wordsworth's lifetime, not uncommon in Westmorland. In 1692 a record was written that eagles "do breed in the parish of Brampton," and before the poet's day, and most probably during his lifetime, a pair of eagles had their eyrie in Whinfield Park, in the bard's county.

Although the sea-eagle is as a rule depicted as frequenting the immediate neighbourhood of the sea, whether the shore be bordered by sand-hills, or by high and rocky cliffs, it not only inhabited the extensive rabbit-warrens of the interior of England, but established itself upon a rock or island in the middle of lakes, from which elevation it kept, and does keep still in some few places, a rigid look-out. "On these islands," says Wholley, "it builds upon the ground or in a tree, a nest whose construction does not at all differ from that of the golden eagle, there being always in it a certain amount of *Luzula sylvatica*. The tree need by no means be a large one. I have seen two nests of different years, in separate islands, in one loch, each only about four feet

from the ground, in very small trees." I am almost convinced that the white-tailed eagle is the bird which plays such a prominent part in the writings of our poet. After thus describing the locality of its nest—

> "Some tall crag
> That is the eagle's birthplace."

Wordsworth, speaking of his native country, says—

> "With admiration would he lift his eyes
> To the wide-ruling eagle, and his hand
> Was loth to assault the majesty he loved;
> Else had the strongest fastnesses proved weak
> To guard the royal bird. . . .
> * * * * *
> Fixed at their seat, the centre of the mere
> Were subject to young Oswald's steady aim."

The extraordinary vision in birds has ever been a marvel to man, and the *Falconidæ* are conspicuous for their wonderful superiority of sight. Anatomy boasts of no more perfect adaptability of structure to function than the numerous and beautiful modifications in the form of various parts of the eyes of different animals. We must not merely look upon the eye as an instrument built up of a *cornea*, *sclerotica*, and *retina*, provided with eyebrows, eyelid, and eyelashes, but we must look upon it as the most useful organization—as an instrument destined to exercise vision in nearly any media, either of transparency or density. Lacépède calculates that birds' sight is nine times more extensive than that of the farthest-sighted man.

If one thinks of the eagle possessing the finest scent and the most penetrating sight, then will be read a grand picture, and what is worth reading, in the lines—

> "Then with despair's whole weight his spirits sink,
> No bread to feed him, and the snow his drink,
> While, ere his eyes can close upon the day,
> The eagle of the Alps o'ershades her prey."

But not only is the eagle immensely far-sighted, but in the opinion of some it possesses the power of gazing undazzled at the glaring sun. This was evidently Campbell's belief, for he writes—

> "As the spirit, with eagle gaze,
> The moon of heaven undazzled by the blaze,"

and Burns says—

> "The eagle's gaze alone surveys
> The sun's meridian splendour."

Wordsworth, too, has written lines which are tinged with the faintest colour of, presumably, the same belief—

> "Ambition reigns
> In the waste wilderness: the soul ascends
> Towards her native firmament of heaven,
> When the fresh eagle, in the month of May,
> Upborne, at evening, on replenished wing,
> This shaded valley leaves, and leaves the dark
> Empurpled hills, conspicuously renewing
> A proud communication with the sun,
> Low sunk beneath the horizon."

Whether he had the idea that the eagle can comfortably focus the sun in his mind, when he wrote the last two lines, it is impossible to say from the context; all the author can do is to form his own personal conjectures, and leave the verse in the hands of those better able to sift its full meaning.

In his poem "Liberty," the poet again couples, in somewhat mystic verse, the eagle and the sun; he says—

> "If unreproved the ambitious eagle mount
> Sunward, to seek the daylight in its fount,
> Bays, gulfs, and ocean's Indian width shall be,
> Till the world perishes, a field for thee!"

It is only natural that such a creature as the eagle, leaving its post of survey, should at once attract the attention of a poet like Wordsworth, who was ever keen to note some fresh object in his daily walks. Let us then leave the eagle "exulting in the height,"* and "swift as the imperial eagle flies" †—

> "Soar with the eagle."

In *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare's tautological description of the eagle's flight equals all other accounts I have ever read in simple beauty—

> "An eagle flight, bold, and forth on,
> Leaving no track behind."

What a sublime word-picture of the most elegant execution of the most perfect locomotion!

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* Heber: "Palestine." † Fenden: "Odes."

Wordsworth, while still but a boy, in one line has placed his description so near to that of Shakespeare, that there is but little room of superiority between them. He says—

> "And slow the insulted eagle wheels away."

Who, I ask again, being not in touch with Nature, could thus versify? Who could pen thus without an insight? There is no midnight flavour here.

The poetic eagle, like the raven, loves the storm. Coleridge, Scott, Shelley, and a host of minor poets, are of one mind touching this sentiment. Eagles with the poets are at once the "Playmates of the Storm," and Wordsworth has not let his brother Lake scholar down, for he pens the lines—

> "Triumphant on the bosom of the storm
> Glances the fire-clad eagle's wheeling form."

Again he says—

> "Among the mountains were we nursed, loved stream,
> Tho', near the eagle's nest, within brief sail,
> I, of his bold wing floating on the gale."

As a bird of prey and carrion eater, or rather as a fawn and lamb destroyer—an occupation which this bird is rather noted for—Wordsworth writes—

> "The malady that griped
> Her prostrate form with unrelaxing power,
> As the fierce eagle fastens on the lamb."

The eagle's piercing scream has not been left unrecog-

nized by Wordsworth, it drew his attention, and of it he wrote—

> "Thou to be heard, lone eagle! freed
> From snowy peak and cloud, attune
> Thy hungry barkings to the hymn
> Of joy, that from her utmost walls
> The six days' work by flaming Seraphim,
> Transmits to heaven!"

Yet again he tells us—

> "Faint *wail* of eagle melting into blue
> Beneath the cliffs."

## THE OSPREY.

(*Pandion haliaëtus.*)

THE sea-haunting Osprey, or Fishing Hawk, as it is frequently called, does not take a very prominent place in English poetry. So excellent are the opportunities afforded the Americans of observing this bird's actions, that as the New World grows older, we may well expect the bulk of osprey references to grow stouter. Imagine one island, near the eastern extremity of Long Island, New York, having the owners of three hundred nests flying about! What a glorious sight! the eagle's flight is bold, but then it is not nearly so elegant as that of the osprey. America's fortune is happily not existing totally unregarded, for already admirable descriptions have been written by her ornithologists of the manner in which it obtains its prey from Undine. "When looking out for its prey," says Sir John Richardson, "it sails with great ease and elegance, in undulating and curved lines, at a considerable altitude above the water, from whence it precipitates itself upon its quarry, and bears it off in its claws; or it not unfrequently, on the fish moving to too great a depth, stops suddenly in its descent, and hovers for a few seconds in the air, like a kite or a kestrel, suspending

itself in the same spot by a quick flapping of its wings; it then makes a second, and, in general, unerring dart upon its prey, or regains the former altitude by an elegant spiral flight. It seizes the fish with its claws, sometimes scarcely appearing to dip its feet in the water, and at other times plunging entirely under the surface with force sufficient to throw up a considerable spray. It emerges again, however, so speedily, as to render it evident that it does not attack fish swimming at any great depth." The author of a "Tour in Sunderland," Mr. St. John, who had ample opportunities of studying the osprey in its native haunts, furnishes us with another truly excellent picture. He says—"I generally saw the osprey fishing about the lower pools of the rivers near their mouths; and a beautiful sight it is. The long-winged bird hovers (as a kestrel does over a mouse) at a considerable distance above the water, sometimes on perfectly motionless wing, and sometimes wheeling slowly in circles, turning his head and looking eagerly down at the water. He sees a trout when at a great height, and suddenly closing his wings, drops like a shot bird into the water, often plunging completely under, and at other times appearing scarcely to touch the water, but seldom failing to rise again with a good-sized fish in his talons. Sometimes, in the midst of his swoop, the osprey stops himself suddenly in the most abrupt manner, probably because the fish, having changed its position, is no longer within range. He then hovers stationary in the air,

anxiously looking below for the reappearance of the prey. Having well examined one pool, he suddenly turns off, and with rapid flight takes himself to an adjoining part of the stream, where he again begins to hover and circle in the air. On making a pounce into the water, the osprey dashes up the spray far and wide, so as to be seen from a considerable distance."

Now that literature possesses such descriptions as these, written by men who hardly knew they were writing elegantly, so minute are their sentences, we are at once provided with truths linked with a golden thread, and a directory to show us how to read that we may understand. By the aid of such narrations we are prepared to read the lines which Wordsworth has written about the osprey—

> "'Mid stormy vapours ever driving by,
> Where ospreys, cormorants, and herons cry,
> Hovering o'er rugged wastes too bleak to rear
> That common growth of earth, the foodful ear."

## THE FALCON.*

(*Falco peregrinus?*)

IN the poem "Hart Leap Well," I find the lines—

> "But though Sir Walter like a falcon flies,
> There is a doleful silence in the air."

Evidently when he wrote this couplet, Wordsworth was thinking of the angry agitation and exasperated fear with which a Falcon is greeted when it makes its entrance amongst the feathered denizens of the air. Sir Walter flies like a falcon through the air, yet unlike a falcon, he creates no hubbub. Albeit, mounted for the third time in one day, no agitation or excitement prevails. Those who see him exchange his exhausted steed and mount a "comely grey," watch him in silence, in that silence which is, if anything, the result of awe. He pursues the renowned hart privately, and his fixed ambition causes "a doleful silence." If the intense perturbation which is immediately developed amongst birds when an uninvited falcon thrusts its presence on

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* I have no authority for specifying Wordsworth's falcon, *falco peregrinus*. The apt term, *peregrinus*, is itself my apology, since this bird has been discovered in very distant parts of the world.

the assembled company be remembered, the reference will the better be appreciated.

A second reference, which needs no explanation, may be found in "The Excursion"—

> "A pair of falcons wheeling on the wing
> In clamorous agitation, round the crest
> Of a tall rock, their airy citadel."

This sketch, which occurs in the section "Despondency," is sufficient to make ornithologists hunger for more. The falcon appears to have been no favourite with Wordsworth; his pages are piteously starved of references to the bird. So isolated is the quotation above repeated among the verses of the Lake Poet, that it stands uniquely out of touch with its surroundings—it is a falcon reference, a sudden flash; exists only to make the impression of some thought of falcon swiftness. Laudation—not permitted to rust friendship—has been gained by those poets who have sung of this bird as a creature of mythology rather than a living reality. Fainly would many read in Wordsworth's writings some account of falconry, or the price paid for a *Peregrine* in 1588. Others, antiquarians mayhap, complain bitterly that they cannot trace any poetical record of such well-thrashed tales as that which tells that whoso watches a certain falcon for seven days and seven nights without sleeping—a task harder than any effected by Hercules—shall have his first wish granted by some fay, who, as the seasons advance, will give him her hand, and eventually carry out her fabled transactions and become

his ultimate ruin. There live others, mythologists, who must read of the falcon in connection with Nisus, Scylla, Chione, and Dædalion, or as a messenger of Apollo, as the avatar of the gods of Asgard, the "perambulator" of Vishnu, the badge of Egypt's supreme deity, or not at all.

For my part, give me such lines as those Wordsworthian ones I have just quoted, or two such grand lines as sweet Jean Ingelow's—

> "The bold marsh-harrier wets her tawny breast—
> We scared her oft in childhood from her prey."

Let me have my falcon an object of Nature, not one deteriorated into domesticated lustful passion. Place before me two such lines as Grahame's—

> "Then skims the hawk
> Forth from her cliff, eyeing the furzy slope."

or let me read lines written by Wordsworth's great co-Nature poets, Burns and Tennyson. When one reads such pictures as that painted by Grahame, he has the bird flying smoothly before him, forth and steadfastly on. Such pictures—rare prints—are more satisfying than the most masterly lines on falconry or folklore, because they are to-day illustrated in many of Nature's pages by that master whom none can copy, by that harmonizing pen which draws naught crude, naught unfinished. If by any chance another and a greater Wordsworth, Burns, Bloomfield, Hogg, or Tennyson

lives, may he sing of this bird as a bird, and not as a poor instrument of falconry. Let us, who see the bird's flight only in poetic lines, hope against hope that the falcon, as a bird of sport, will be left to fill the pages of Yarrell's works, or the clever descriptions of Mr. Harting's writings, and not thrust into every picture of both Nature and sport, sitting upon the wrist with "jesses" and "bells" and "hood" on, ready to start any moment after some miserable quarry.

## THE KESTREL.

If, as you stroll along some lonely country road, that jubilation, which has been the order of the hour amongst the little hedgerow creatures, suddenly ceases and a sabbath-like silence, intensified by its unexpected contrast, permeates the air, only broken by some rustling leaf and the sharp fluttering of a distressed finch—if such is the sudden and somewhat painful change—on looking up you may be pretty sure to see in the dim distance, far away overhead, a hawk leisurely hanging in the empyrean vault of the heavens. What a change this bird makes in rural episodes! The presence of a hawk is in Nature what the drum is in a band. Nature needs something to divert the scene of gladness to one of intense fright; she has all that is required in her hawk. Complete changes are needed to draw our attention to her sublimity; without hawks this world would be intolerably blissful. The intrusion of a hawk into the company of birds answers the same thing as the intrusion of a cad into a drawing-room. The cases are similar. Both force silence where jollity has just reigned; the absence of both is required before ease can again

return. The ornithological hawk is represented by the human "shark."

But to return. If this hawk, which I have pictured as the last ideal touch of Nature, is hovering, most probably it will be the Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) or wind-hover as it is often termed, the most common species of the British *Falconidæ*, and the best known hawk that flies in England; a mouse destroyer of the most vigilant type. It is a glorious bird, symmetrically shaped, handsomely coloured, and most elegant in its motions in the air, where it maintains its position by means of a short but rapid motion of the wings.

Our small spring visitor, the beautiful and slender hobby, the miniature peregrine falcon, the merlin, or "stone falcon," and the goshawk, a rare species in England at present, are one and all too rare luxuries in England to represent *incognito* such a passage as—

> "Now, the reedy marge
> Cleared, with a strenuous arm I dipped the oar,
> Free from obstruction; and the boat advanced
> Through crystal water, smoothly as a hawk,
> That, disentangled from the shady boughs
> Of some thick wood, her place of covert, cleaves
> With correspondent wings the abyss of air. *

We have in these lines the kestrel, free and unbound, not a thing of "bells" and trappings, of "hood" and obsolete chivalric days, but a bird which can only be approached with like quietness to that depicted in the lines.

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* Excursion: "Churchyard among the Mountains."

A telescope is indispensable to those who would see kestrels at their best, yet by stealth one may reach within a short distance from the bird and watch it on its perch. But one unguarded movement, one uncontemplated snap of some hidden twig, the displacement of an overhanging briar, and the noise will make—

> "The hawk forget his perch."

Never once does Wordsworth re-sing those oft-chanted songs of knight-errantry. Perhaps, he thought his friend in Scotland was doing quite sufficient in that line to supply the needs of the public. He ignores totally such lines as those written by Scott in "Marmion"—

> "And falc'ners hold the ready hawk,
> And foresters, in greenwood trim,
> Lead in the leash the gaze-hounds grim,
> Attentive as the bratchet's bay
> From the dark covert drove the prey,
> To slip them as he broke away."

And, happily, such is the case. Already the links of the chain of plagiarism are too numerous; a new chain, built of the finest gold of Nature, is imperatively wanted. I would read in the poets Nature unadulterated, not Nature poisoned by the machinations of man's destructive hand.

If the reader has kept hawks or watched them while imprisoned, no doubt he knows the meaning of the words—

> "The unseen hawk
> Whistling to clouds and sky-born streams."

## THE SPARROW-HAWK.

"THE Sparrow-hawk" (*Accipiter niscis*), says Yarrell, in his "British Birds," "is another short-winged hawk, but of comparatively small size, in its habits very similar to the bird last described (the goshawk, *Astur palumbarius*), and has been aptly termed a goshawk in miniature. In most wooded districts the sparrow-hawk is a common and well-known species, bold, active, vigilant and destructive, a dangerous enemy to small quadrupeds and young birds, upon which it subsists, and is so daring, during the season in which its own nestlings require to be provided with food, as frequently to venture among the out-buildings of a farmhouse, where it has been observed to rapidly skim over the poultry-yard, snatch up a chick, and get off with it in an instant. *The female sparrow-hawk is, indeed, the only bird of prey which a game-preserver nowadays need fear.*"

The sparrow-hawk is the bird I should conjecture Wordsworth had in his mind when he wrote, "Hint from the Mountains for Certain Political Pretenders." It runs thus—

"Who but hails the sight with pleasure,
When the wings of genius rise,
Their ability to measure
With great enterprise;

"But in man was ne'er such daring
As yon hawk exhibits, pairing
His brave spirit with the war in
The stormy skies!

"Mark him, how his power he uses,
Lays it by, at will resumes!
Mark, ere for his haunt he chooses
Clouds and utter glooms!

"Then he wheels in downward mazes;
Sunward now his flight he raises,
Catches fire, as seems, and blazes
With uninjured plumes!"

### Answer.

"Stranger, 'tis no act of courage
Which aloft thou dost discern;
No bold *bird* gone forth to forage
'Mid the tempest stern;

"But such mockery as the nations
See, when public perturbations
Lift men from their native stations,
Like yon tuft of fern;

"Such it is;—the aspiring creature
Soaring on undaunted wing
(So you fancied) is by nature
A dull helpless thing.

"Dry and withered, light and yellow;
*That* to be the tempest's fellow!
Wait and you shall see how hollow
It's endeavouring!"

This misconception may be called fanciful. John Burroughs has thought fit to compare Walt Whitman's

endeavours to the "Flight of an Eagle!" The description in the first two interrogatory stanzas, save, perhaps, when they unfortunately touch upon the position of some phantom hawk's haunt, and suggest rather an imaginary abode of a purely ideal kestrel than the haunt of any other bird—pictures for the reader the dashing sparrow-hawk, a daring bird, which has been known to entangle its talons in the regal plumage of the majestic golden eagle.

## THE KITE.

(*Milvus ictinus.*)

LEAVING—

"The hawk *
High in the beetling cliff."

I find the Homer of Lakeland has written many beautiful, if not exactly valuable, references to—

"The sailing glead,"

or gled, as the Anglo-Saxons called the—

"Kites that swim sublime
In the still repeated circles, screaming loud."†

The "Puttock," as it was termed in Hertfordshire and Essex, is becoming ever rarer and rarer. Its tail-feathers, valuable for salmon-flies, and its adventures amongst rising game, have assisted its extermination in a twofold manner, and lucky now is he who can see those superb circles which are exhibited—

"While, near the midway cliff, the silvered kite,
In many a whistling circle wheels her flight."

The allusion in this couplet to the bird whistling as it wheels is not imaginary, for while soaring in its

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* Thomson: "Spring." † Cowper: "The Sofa."

characteristic circles in most elegant and graceful fashion, a shrill cry put into letters, "*whéw, heh-heh-heh*," may be often and repeatedly heard. On the occasion of the bird altering its course by the aid of its outspread forked tail this cry is rendered particularly clearly.

No more graphic description can be written of the aërial motions of the kite than Wordsworth and other poets have given, when they simply say—

> "And kites *
> That overhead are sailing in the sky."

Macaulay makes the kite out to be an almost terrible creature when, in "Virginia," he writes—

> "See how his eyes gloat on thy grief, like a kite's upon the prey."

As a matter of ungarnished fact, the kite's food is principally offal; small mammals, birds, reptiles, frogs, and fish being captured as choice dainties—dessert. Though it is a destroyer of very young game and poultry, especially when it has a brood craving for sustenance, old hens will drive it oft from their domains, and it is questionable whether the ancient grouse, which have been repeatedly found in its nest—to the detriment of the possessor—in Scotland, have not been sickly birds, or more likely birds stolen from a peregrine's abode. In truth, the kite's powers of preying are

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* Michael.

limited. They are even scarcely those set down by Clare—

> "And other losses to the dames recite,
> Of chick and duck and gosling gone astray,
> All falling preys to the swooping kite;
> And on the story runs from morning, noon, and night."

Yet when the individual hunger is multiplied by the several undiminishable cravings of two or three young kites, the parent will often grow so bold that it will pounce down and snatch its prey from before the guns of sportsmen. It will come from a height the strained eye cannot reach, and in a moment, like the flash of lightning, carry off a chick to feed its babes—

> "From aloft, a kite
> Pounced, and the dove, which from its ruthless beak
> She could not rescue, perished in her sight!"

The sonnet from which this is extracted, recounting how poor Lesbia lost her favourite dove, is strictly in keeping with the nature of the kite, but that nature must first be sharpened to the deed.

Another unqualified point in the life history of the kite may be found dauntlessly expounded in the "Excursion"—

> "The kite,
> That makes her dwelling on the mountain rocks."

This unarmoured statement may hereafter be the target of an ornithological volley of instructive criticisms. The nest of the kite, built of sticks, bones, bits

of paper, old rags, and that "lesser linen" which Shakespeare mentions, is "almost always," says Mr. Howard Saunders, "placed in a tree." But the editor of the last two volumes, and the condenser of the whole of Yarrell's great work, does not neglect to inform us that this indigenous bird, which was once such a common scavenger in London as to attract the attention of foreign visitors, breeds in North Africa in *rocks*. In Lincolnshire, a former stronghold, it evidently chose trees to build in, they being, as it were, "ready at hand." Are we to suppose, then, that the kite, a bird which exists generally at enormous altitudes, would not, in preference to trees, select and occupy on occasions such haunts as Westmorland affords? If Wordsworth is wrong in his localization of the puttock's dwelling, which I take to mean *nest*, then instead of the graceful bird which Hurdis would have us—

> "Mark—
> Above the earth, above the nauseous fumes
> Of dangerous earth,"

we have but a poor arboreal creature, which at once brings to our mind Clare's words—

> "Slow o'er the wood the puttock sails,
> And mournful, as the storms arise,
> His feeble note of sorrow wails
> To the unpitying, frowning skies."

## THE BUZZARD.

FIFTY years ago the Common Buzzard (*Buteo vulgaris*) might be seen circling high in air; heard uttering its plaintive mewing cry; witnessed incubating; discovered snatching a stray partridge from the earth. But where now can we see the bird, save occasionally at Spurn, or at some other East Coast point, flying inland to meet its death? The ground game law and pheasant mania—worship, call it, if you will—have completed their work; the larger the hawk, the more rapid the annihilation! Slowly the hawks are disappearing; already the three beautiful buzzards are rarities. The finer the game the greater its danger! How much longer will Dryden's lines, to be found in "Hind and Panther," be comprehensible? How soon will Ramsay's "Buzart" be a second Archæopteryx—a fossil remnant of departed days? Soon, very soon, the meaning of Wordsworth's lines—

> "Sometimes he'll hide in a cave of a rock,
> And whistle as shrill as a buzzard cock"—

will either be too vague to be understood, or, worse still, misconstrued to mean the cockchafer or "buzzard clock" of the north.

# Book V.

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## STEGANOPODES.

*BOOK V.*

# STEGANOPODES.

## THE COMMON CORMORANT.

If any bird has a right to stand indignant on a pair of webbed feet and challenge the bards to justify their erroneously conceived versifications, that bird is the harmless Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), an unfortunate creature whose character they have unceasingly bemired with unadulterated slander. Indeed, the undeserved calumny which has always been written against this bird by the poets reminds one somewhat of that state of the medical mind which has designated drunkenness, with probably a good deal of reason, a disease. Cormorant slander is, amongst the poets, simply a disease. Why have the Muses so utterly detested the pitiable cormorant? From the time of Spenser to the present, the poor bird has been literally lashed with opprobium of the gravest and most malignant kind. Not content merely to term the cormorant "ravenous," "rapacious," "greedy," "swathy," "croaking," the

bards have placarded it as a true augur of death, as "death's living arrow," as "divining death."

Does the bird's characteristic existence warrant this battery of scornful ignominies? The Black Cormorant, as it is often called, to distinguish it from the Shag, inhabits swamps, or, as Wordsworth more poetically says—

> "'Mid stormy vapours ever driving by,
> Where ospreys, cormorants, and herons cry,
> Hovering o'er rugged wastes too bleak to rear
> That common growth of earth, the foodful ear."

Then the cormorant's nest is an unshapen collection of coarse grass and sea weeds held sometimes, but not often, together with children's whips and spades, gentlemen's light canes, and handles of ladies' parasols, stolen for the purpose.

The young when first hatched are objects of disgust rather than pleasure, blind, and covered with a bluish-black skin. Eels are the birds' favourite dish, and these they knock on the head, throw them up, and swallow in a fashion dexterous enough to grace a less slippery cause. All this may be written against the bird; nevertheless, on the other and more charitable hand, cormorants may be said to possess considerable intelligence. They have been known to attach themselves and exhibit love towards man. Saxby, in his "Birds of Scotland," speaks of one which used to fish for himself, and return to the fireside of his master, his favourite spot, in the evening. So attached was this bird to its

owner, that it would fly several hundred yards to meet him. Who, moreover, does not know of the cormorant as an ardent fisher? From time immemorial down to this day the bird has assisted the Chinese and Japanese fishermen in their prescribed avocation, and sportsmen in France from the time of Louis XIII., and likewise those in England from the time of James I., have known the use of the cormorant in affording them amusing pleasure.

But the poets are careless, if not ungrateful. Instead of singing as Armstrong does of the "ducking cormorants," the poets, almost without exception, have caught the contagious malady I have previously named, and the result has been many similar lines in substance to those penned by the Lake bard—

> "And towards the mystic ring
> Where augurs stand, in future questioning,
> Slowly the cormorant aims her heavy flight,
> Portending ruin to each baleful rite,
> That, in the lapse of ages hath crept o'er
> Diluvian truths, and patriarchal lore."

# Book VI.

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# HERODIONES.

*BOOK VI.*

# HERODIONES.

COMMON HERON—BITTERN.

## THE HERON.

THOSE who have read Charles Kingsley's "Hereward the Wake" must remember that beautiful description of bird life around Crowland in days past. Lady Godiva, with Hereward, is pictured sitting at the head of her dead son; the boat is steered by Winter, Gwenock plies the stroke-oar. "They rowed away from Crowland by many a mere and many an ea; through narrow reaches of clear brown glassy water; between the dark-green alders; between the pale-green reeds; where the coot clanked, and the bittern boomed, and the sedge-bird, not content with its own sweet song, mocked the notes of all the birds around; and then out into the broad lagoons, where hung motionless, high overhead, hawk beyond hawk, buzzard beyond buzzard, kite beyond kite, as far as eye could see. Into the air, as they rowed on,

whirred up great skeins of wild fowl innumerable, with a cry as of all the bells of Crowland, or all the hounds of the Bruneswold; while clear above all their noise sounded the wild whistle of the curlews and the trumpet note of the great white swan. Out of the reeds, like an arrow, shot the peregrine, singled one luckless mallard from the flock, caught him up, struck him stonedead with one blow of his terrible heel, and swept his prey with him into the reeds again." If one may find fault with such a lovely picture, it would be in the absence of the heron. Such limning as that I have just quoted leads us to question its detailed minuteness; invariably we find ourselves silently questioning a description's caustic correctness or more often its limited exactness. Kingsley's picture needs one other touch, a solitary heron disappearing on slow, flapping, rounded wings. In autumn herons appear in family parties on the fitties and the marshes to fish all day long in the drains—or more commonly still, to follow the receding tide and feed on the various crustacea left in the pools of salted water. Many a time an ornithologist's eyes may banquet on the sight of twelve herons rising unexpectedly from some little, well-rushed pool, and even in summer —the alleged time of Hereward's brother's death—a few old birds come from distances daily, or rather nightly, to visit the drains and streams.* Who wonders that

* See Mr. Cordeaux's instructive book, "Birds of the Humber District."

Tennyson, who was born at Somersby, has so often referred to the heron, which

"Rises from his watch beside the mere."

The present laureate's birthplace has afforded him golden opportunities, for near Sleaford there is a well-founded heronry.

Westmorland, too, boasts three heronries of no mean importance. Rydal Lake was, during Wordsworth's lifetime, a stronghold. Like Tennyson, Wordsworth has not neglected his chance; some of his finest bird references are dedicated to the herons which, with ospreys and cormorants, dwell—

"'Mid stormy vapours ever driving by."

What more beautiful could we desire than the lines—

"The bird, who ceased, with fading light, to thread
Silent the hedge or streaming rivulet's bed,
From his grey reappearing tower shall soon
Salute with boding note the rising moon."

We can find nothing in Wordsworth which is akin to those well-known lines written by Somerville (which are too long to here reprint). He formed a new school which was to do away with the heron as an object simply of falconry, and excepting the couplet which informs us that Hoffer wore—

"That simple crest, a heron's plume,"

which savours of chivalric times, Wordsworth, the true and faithful poet of Nature, the leader of that great school

to which Burns and Tennyson so strictly belong, cannot be found guilty in his writings of using repeated commonplaces, nor yet placing his object in a position in which it must inevitably be the plagiaristic shadow of preceding matter. While others, rhymsters rather than poets, have been content to fill their poems with drawings which too minutely depict the heron as the general—nay proper—quarry of the falcon, Wordsworth and Tennyson have adhered to their text, and limned for us the heron as it is, as it should be. Poetic literature is starved of such references as Wordsworth's—

> "And heron, as resounds the trodden shore,
> Shoots upward, darting his long neck before."

But, on the other hand, it is gorged with such lines as Somerville's—

> "So flies the heron, pursu'd, but fighting flies."

No bird is more poetical than the heron, yet no bird has been so ruthlessly condemned to restricted usage. The heron, listless by the side of some slowly running brook, is a poem in itself; Nature has no parallel image of the peace of this sight. And then we have the gregarious bird-building in January if the season be mild, or February if the season is too severe. Year after year in succession they return to their established retreats, sometimes to precipitous sea-cliffs, to crags covered with ivy and shrub, at others to barren hillsides, but generally to deserted ruins or to chimney-tops. Will future poets neglect, as past poets have neglected, to mention the bird's natural economy; how

they lay a second clutch of eggs, to be incubated partly at least by the warmth of their first brood? How much longer is precedents to rule the poets? How much longer is the weird alarm-note "frank, frank" to be substituted for lines which allege that a young heron is royal diet? The bird's partiality to England and its apparent dislike of France—where, at Ecury-le-Grand, exists the only French heronry—has not yet attracted any poetical attention. Will future bards have nothing to say about this? Will they—these teachers in verse—be silent altogether regarding those well-developed powdery tufts of decomposed feathers, the use of which has so long baffled all explanation? How much longer will poets be before they render back to the heron that majestic position which it once so graciously shared with the swan? When will they learn that the "Hernshaw" is neither a "handsaw" nor a "hawk," but something which possesses the two excellent qualities of both, being the object which can afford "marvellous and delectable pastime," infinite scope for the powers of Mr. Marks, and last but not least, the one figure which may be invariably used symphoniously where perfect rest is required to be described?

## THE BITTERN.

THE time of wandering and bellowing of the Bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*) has thus been particularised by Wordsworth—

> "In youth's keen eye the livelong day was bright,
> The sun at morning, and the stars of night,
> Alike, when heard the bittern's hollow bill,
> Or the first woodcocks roamed the moonlight hill."*

While the woodcock is a true nocturnal fowl, seeking its repose by day and sallying forth at night in search of food by whirls and twists along tracks known as "cockshoots" or "cocks-roads," the bittern *usually* feeds at night, and it is during the night in the spring, and during the breeding season, if the drained and reclaimed swamps were once more to exist, that we should hear that strange characteristic noise, whence the generic term *Botaurus* has arisen.

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* These last two lines are often quoted—

> "When first the vales the bittern fills,
> Or the first woodcock roams the moonlight hills."

Another interpretation runs—

> "Alike when first the bittern's hollow bill
> Was heard, or woodcocks roamed the moonlight hill."

Though correct to a limited extent, I am forced to admit that the assumed contrast is scarcely distinct enough to bear investigation. While the woodcock is busy living upon—"suction," as Byron has it—the bittern also is abroad "shaking the earth" with his booming. The bill or mouthpiece of this uncanny sound is not "ingulpht," as Thomson would have us believe, but stretched horizontally out from a body covered with ruffled feathers. Indeed, it is when bellowing in anger that the bittern of the fen is to be seen at his best; for then, instead of remaining stick-like and motionless, he opens and drops his wings, raises the feathers of his back, neck, and head, and swelling his throat, stands with glittering eye, ready to assert his right by might.

# Book VII.

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# ANSERS.

*BOOK VII.*

# ANSERS.

SWAN—DUCKS.

## THE SWAN.

MR. HAMERTON'S short but interesting notice of swans has always pleased me more than any other portion of his admirable writing. Having affirmed that domestication is always, in a certain sense, deterioration, the author of "Chapters on Animals" goes on to say, "our tame swans are very beautiful; they have a developed luxurious beauty like that of garden flowers, of enormous lilies and roses, but *can they fly?* Beautiful as are the swans upon the Thames, admirably as they adorn the rich reaches of a landscape, which without them would be all but perfect, and with them is the ideal realised, what, after all, does the Londoner know of swans? He alone who has heard at once the harmony of their hundred wings, and seen the white flock come to earth on the borders of some lonely mere, he alone knows the tribe or nation of the swans! 'There is a wild harmony,' says Charles St. John, 'in their bugle-cry as

they wheel round and round, now separating into small companies, as each family of five or six seems inclined to alight; and now all joining again in a long undulating line, waiting for the word of command of some old leader!' You may see this occasionally in the remote Highlands, or more frequently you may hear the sound of wings far above you in the night, the 'gabble raches' or 'gabriel ratchets'* of popular superstition, the passing of the aerial hunter with all his noisy hounds!

"Still, if the swan that is commonly known to us has not this collective grandeur, he has even superior individual beauty. The wild swan is not so beautiful nor so majestic as the living ornament of our familiar Thames. No painter who undertook to represent a royal progress on the river would fail to give us the noble bird close to the royal barge. His white breast meets the wavelets, impelled invisibly by rhythmic impulses, his soft wings catch the gentle airs of summer, whilst high on the graceful neck dwells the living head that governs that perfect motion! What need of green of parrot, or scarlet of flamingo, or insect iridescence? What need of any colour but that effulgent whiteness, that golden beak, and that one touch of black?

"We have full liberty to enjoy the beauty of these glorious birds without any prosaic drawback from our ideal. They are completely and harmoniously majestic.

* See Wordsworth's sonnet commencing—

"Though narrow be that old man's cares."

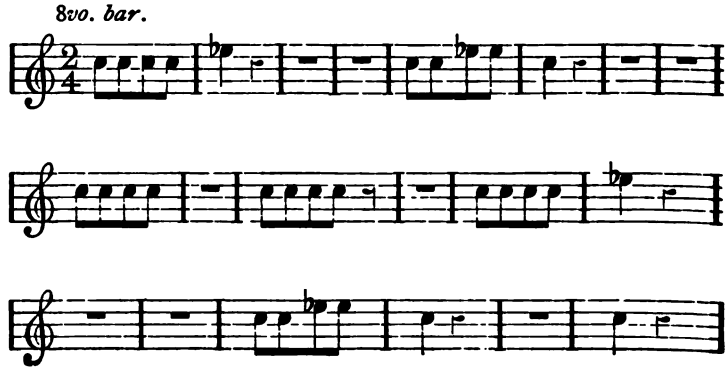
They are full of courage, they are devotedly faithful and affectionate, and they live a hundred years. Yet, since the bird who could match the eagle in courage and man himself in longevity, and with whose beauty the king of the gods did not disdain to clothe himself, had never given the least sign of any musical talent or accomplishment, the fertile human imagination, always so unwilling to leave any hiatus in its details, invented that most poetical fable of the swan's song at the close of a songless life; as if the bird, which had never been musical when most happy, became so in the dark shadow of imminent dissolution. Of all strange old beliefs, I think this is one of the most curiously beautiful. Our forefathers took it quite seriously, and went and listened for the melody of dying swans, as the Queen of Navarre went to see a young lady die that she might catch a glimpse of the soul as it passed between the body and the ceiling. The same Queen of Navarre explained the swan's song by the supposition that the bird's spirit leaving the body through so long a neck, would produce musical murmurs. Michelet half believes that the swan really did sing in Virgil's time, but that since then, having come into northern climes, her muse, which was of the south, is mute, and the bird alone survives."

Mr. Hamerton knows, indeed, the true value of swans; he knows the worth of Richard Cœur de Lion's gift to England.

No bird has been the happy recipient of more compliments than the "peaceful monarch of the lake,

(*Cygnus olor*). Yet during the season of incubation and rearing of young, there lives scarcely any bird more pugnacious or more provocative of fear. Every poet goes into raptures over Lir's wandering daughter, Fionnuala, and few there are who can stand out against the infatuation which has led poets, critics, and even stern moralists into the belief that its songless life closes with a canorus death.

In his "Instructions to Young Sportsmen," Colonel Hawker says—"The only note which I ever heard the wild swan, in winter, utter, is his well-known 'whoop.' But one summer evening I was amused with watching and listening to a domesticated one as he swam up and down the water in the Regent's Park. He turned up a sort of melody, made with two notes, C and the minor third, E flat, and kept working his head as if delighted with his own performance." The melody, taken down on the spot by a first-rate musician, Auguste Bertini, was as follows :—



The Abbé Arnaud, in remarks which differ very materially from Colonel Hawker's observations, says—"The swan, with his wings expanded, his neck outstretched, and his head erect, places himself opposite his mate, uttering a cry to which the female replies by another half a note lower. The voice of the male rises from A (la) to B flat (si bemol), that of the female from G sharp (sol dièse) to A. The first note is short and transient, and has the effect which our musicians term *sensible*, so that it is not separated from the second, but seems to glide into it. Observe that, fortunately for the ear, they do not both sing at once; in fact, if while the male sounded B flat the female gave A, or if the male uttered A while the female gave G sharp, there would result the hardest and most unsupportable of discords. We may add that this dialogue is subjected to a constant and regular rhythm, with the measure of two times. The keeper assured me that during their amours, these birds have a cry still sharper, but much more agreeable."

Again we are told by Mr. Saunders that the swan has a "soft low voice, rather plaintive and with little variety, but not disagreeable;" and Mr. Harting says "Although the swan has no 'song,' properly so called, it has a soft and rather plaintive note, monotonous but not disagreeable."

From a stupid belief that swans actually sing, a belief the outcome of infatuated imagination, endearing terms have sprung up, which, though ridiculous, have been

written in all good faith. For example, we have Ben Jonson calling his favourite Shakespeare "The Sweet Swan of Avon"; Fenélon, Archbishop of Cambray, goes by the name of the "Swan of Cambray"; the poetess, Anna Seward, is known as the "Swan of Lichfield"; and John Taylor, the water-poet, is spoken of by Pope as—

> "Taylor . . . . . .
> Once 'Swan of Thames,' tho' now he sings no more."

Now as a matter of unromantic and ungarnished fact, during its lifetime there is about as much true music in the swan as there is in a tree-frog. I have heard them often repeating the notes the Abbé Arnaud mentions, but it is no song, being absolutely monotonous, and though not perhaps disagreeable, is anything but pleasingly agreeable. The only time I have ever heard any noise approaching the "sort of melody" Colonel Hawker mentions, was when once I threw a dead thrush to a hungry pair; then indeed did the female give vent to a run of unearthly snorts, while her suitor tore the little corpse to bits. But to call this or any other note uttered by the swan "music," would be inapt, if not malicious misrepresentation, for the prettiest noise a swan can utter is but a ghastly invocation of his lover's adoration. Had other poets discharged this unfounded notion like Wordsworth has the swan would be still what it is—voicelessly beautiful—

"I heard (*alas! 'twas only in a dream*)
  Strains, which, as sage antiquity believed,
  By waking ears have sometimes been received
Wafted adown the wind from lake or stream;
A most melodious requiem, a supreme
  And perfect harmony of notes, achieved
  By a fair swan on drowsy billows heaved,
O'er which her pinions shed a silver gleam.
  For is she not the votary of Apollo?
And knows she not, singing as he inspires,
  That bliss awaits her which the ungenial hollow*
Of the dull earth partakes not, nor desires?
Mount, tuneful bird, and join the immortal quires!
  She soared, and I awoke, struggling in vain to follow."

Nor does the swan close its life with any sweet dirge, any more than the tortoise or the glowworm does. Charles Waterton once had an opportunity of seeing a swan die. "Although I gave no credence," he says, "to the extravagant notion which antiquity had entertained of melody from the mouth of the dying swan, still I felt anxious to hear some plaintive sound or other, some soft inflection of the voice, which might tend to justify that notion in a small degree, but I was disappointed. He nodded, and then tried to recover himself, and then nodded again, and again held up his head, till, at last, quite enfeebled, and worn out, his head fell gently on the grass, his wings became expanded a trifle or so, and he died whilst I was looking on. He never even uttered his wonted cry, nor so much as a sound to indicate what he felt

* See the "Phædo" of Plato, by which this sonnet was suggested.

within. The silence which the bird maintained to the last tends to show that the dying song of the swan is nothing but a fable, the origin of which is lost in the shades of antiquity. Its repetition can be of no manner of use save as a warning to ornithologists not to indulge in the extravagances of romance, a propensity not altogether unknown in these our later times."

Some time ago Mr. A. D. Webster, writing to the *Field* newspaper, said—" A writer in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, December, 1888, states that 'what becomes of the dead swans is almost as difficult a problem to solve as the like disappearance of defunct donkeys; but that they do die the writer had once an opportunity of witnessing. In a reed-bed by a river-side, the poor bird, probably injured by some means of which there were no outward indications, had beaten out a small dock amongst the water-reeds, and was swimming round and round in a narrow circle, like a boat propelled by one oar, using one foot only, the other apparently paralysed, till it became more and more feeble, and its beautiful neck at length dropped into the water, never more to be proudly arched. On one of the lakes at Holwood Park—one of the Kentish properties of Earl Derby—I also had a like opportunity of witnessing, last year, the death of a swan, and, strange to say, the peculiar circuitous motion mentioned above was likewise observed. On passing along the bank of the lake at mid-day I was attracted by the strange way in which the swan was swimming in a circle of 6ft. in diameter. I

watched with great astonishment the bird for fully twelve minutes, and still it continued the strange course of movement. Thinking that perhaps its attention was attracted by some object in the water, I advanced to within a few yards of the spot, and, contrary to its usual retiring nature, it took no notice, but continued the circular movement by using one leg only. I threw a piece of wood close to it, but no notice was taken, and it kept up the same rate of movement, never increasing the size of the circle. The head was elevated, as on the approach of danger, and the gaze steadily fixed on the water, the eyes never, that I could detect, wandering from the one fascinating point. Time being up I had to leave the strange scene, and on returning some time later was surprised, for I had never thought of approaching death, to find the bird still floating on the lake, but at some distance from where the above took place, with its head reclining, or rather resting, between its wings, and quite dead. Now what strikes me is this, do all swans die in the same peculiar way as above noted, for it is strange that two different birds should, at the approach of death, both swim in the unusual manner related?"

But the editor added the explanatory note—"In the second case, we should doubt if the swan were dead. Had life been really extinct, the head and neck would not have rested between the wings, but would have fallen into the water, and hung down perpendicularly, as happens with all wild-fowl when shot upon the water.

As to the swimming in a circle, two explanations occur to us. The bird may have swallowed a fisherman's bait (as in the case of the swan upon which Waterton performed a successful operation), and got the line so caught under water as to be brought to anchor; or it may, by accident, or old age, have become blind of one eye. We have several times seen winged wild ducks, which proved afterwards to have been shot in one eye, swim round and round in endeavouring to escape."

On the following week Mr. C. Castellain, Cranleigh, Surrey, forwarded for publication the following contribution:—"Referring to the note under the above heading,* in your issue of the 20th inst., I well remember having, some years ago, seen a swan die exactly in the manner described by Mr. A. D. Webster. I do not know the swan's age, but it was an old bird, and was apparently all right in the afternoon before its death. In the evening, however, as I was passing with some friends, our attention was attracted by the swan swimming round in a small circle, using only one foot, and occasionally flapping the wing on the same side, the other side (the left, if I remember right) being apparently paralysed. We watched it for about an hour, until at last its head gradually sank and fell, with the neck stretched out under the water. At last it floated within reach, and we got it out and placed it on the bank, where, after one or two feeble movements, it lay

* "Dead Swans."

still, and we found it in the same position the next morning, quite dead. There was no apparent external injury, and nothing caught in its foot. I have never seen another swan die, so I cannot say if the case was unusual, but I was struck by the similarity of the one I had seen to the cases seen by your correspondent. I may add that this was on a pond in Cheshire, not far from Capenhurst."

Mr. Webster's communication called afresh to my mind a similar scene which took place on my father's pond, and I forwarded the ensuing letter:—"After reading over the query signed A. D. Webster, under the heading of 'Dead Swans,' in your last week's issue, and, after giving careful consideration to your note of explanation at the foot, allow me to record another precisely similar occurrence. For some time my father possessed two fine swans, and they appeared to live healthily together, but the female, greatly to my surprise, died suddenly one night, and not long after this the male bird also died, and in the singular way Mr. Webster records. Although, Sir, I do not wish to doubt your explanation, yet I can positively assure you there need be no doubt about this bird either having swallowed a fish-hook or being blind. I thought nothing of the circumstance until I saw the two records appearing last week, and I cannot account for this peculiar death. The swans were kept on exactly the same water and food as a previous swan we had for years,

which was given away on account of its increasing fierceness."*

There need be little doubt that the romantic idea of the swan's death-song is nothing more or less than a fable, the invention of man's too ingenious and too generous mind.

The swan has further been identified by Wordsworth as we have seen, and other writers, with Apollo, the god of music, and with Orpheus. Legend affirms that swans cannot hatch without a crack of thunder to help them, and mythology tells how Jupiter was not loth to assume its beauty in order to deceive the facile Leda. Again, Venus's aerial chariot was drawn either by swans, doves, or sparrows—

> "Swan-like specks of mountain snow,
> White as the pair that slid along the plains
> Of heaven, when Venus held the reins!"

Besides these lines, we find Wordsworth encouraged by ancient mythology to pen fantastically—

> "He spake, and gliding into view
> Forth from the grotto's dimmest chamber
> Came two mute swans whose plumes of dusky white
> Changed, as the pair approached the light
> Drawing an ebon car, their hue
> (Like clouds of sunset) into lucid amber.

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* Mr. Castellain's letter and my own were published in the same issue. The substantiation is, therefore, the more valuable.

"Once more did gentle Nina lift
The Princess, passive to all changes:
The car received her; then up went
Into the ethereal element
The birds with progress smooth and swift
As thought, when through bright regions memory ranges.

"Sage Merlin, at the slumberer's side,
Instructs the swans their way to measure.
* * * * *
He touched with hesitating hand,
And lo! those birds, far-famed through Love's dominions,
The swans, in triumph clap their wings;
And their necks play, involved in rings,
Like sinless snakes in Eden's happy land;
'Mine is she,' cried the knight; again they clapped their pinions."

But it is high time we left the mythic-musical swan to see what the "Homer of Lakeland" has to say about the swan that—

"Stirs the reeds, his neck and bill
Wetting, that drip upon the water still."

Wordsworth has many times referred to the swan as a beautiful, animated ornament—

"Smooth and still
As the mute swan that floats adown the stream,
Or, on the waters of the unruffled lake,
Anchors her placid beauty."

In his poem "Dion," he compares the beauty of Callicrates' victim to that of a swan—

The nest of the swan consists of a heap of reeds, rushes and coarse herbage, when such may be gathered, but hay and straw if provided will serve the purpose, where the pond is barren of growth. This pile may be formed on the ground near the edge of the water, but an island is generally chosen in preference to the bank. During the period of nidification the male and female are scarcely ever apart. In the nest the female deposits six or seven greenish-white eggs. After six weeks' incubation—the whole duration of which time the male being in constant attendance upon the female, occasionally taking her place upon the eggs, or guarding her with knight-like care—the eggs are hatched, and the female leads and carries her brood down to the water.

It is most probably shortly after the termination of incubation that Wordsworth saw the group which inspired him to write—

"Along the 'wild meandering shore' to view
Obsequious grace the winding swan pursue;
He swells his lifted chest, and backward flings
His bridling neck between his towering wings;
In all the majesty of ease, divides,
And, glorying, looks around the silent tides;
On as he floats, the silvered waters glow,
Proud of the varying arch and moveless form of snow,
While tender cares and mild domestic loves,
With furtive watch pursue her as she moves;
The female with a meeker charm succeeds,
And her *brown* little-ones around her leads,
Nibbling the water lilies as they pass,
Or playing wanton with the floating grass.
She, in a mother's care, her beauty's pride

Forgets, unwearied watching every side;
She calls them near, and with affection sweet
Alternately relieves their weary feet;
Alternately they mount her back, and rest
Close by her mantling wings' embraces prest."

The poet's allusion here to the little cygnets as "brown" may be disputed. The young of the swan when first hatched are admittedly bluish-grey, but in the distance they appear a dusky brown of an extraordinary light shade.

I have frequently had the opportunity of watching a female swan and her offspring, and have repeatedly noticed her carry five little ones on her back at once, while a sixth was left to vainly attempt to struggle up. To lift them on she stretches out her leg, and while elevating the joint, the cygnets climb up between the feathers of her side and her tibia. It is not only to save them the labour of following her against stream that she carries them, for I have seen a female swan carry one or the other of her brood all day long where not the slightest current prevailed.

Another phase in the life history of the swan worth noting is the male's overbearing disposition. Mr. Jesse says "that each family of swans on the river has its own district, and the intruders are driven away." Where the pond or pool is too restricted to permit of more than one "district," the whole water is usurped by a single bird, who drives his colleagues into corners, behind islands, or out altogether. On limited water one swan

will always be found complete monarch, and he will generally wage war with all comers, geese and ducks inclusive. In the year 1890 my father purchased two swans from a pond adjacent; only a field divides the two waters. Being allowed *carte blanche*, I selected the potentate of the lake, and thinking, as he had never bred, cross mating would not be detrimental, I took a female belonging to one of the thrashed birds. A thick hedge and a closely barred gate made pedestrian escape impossible. The female settled down immediately, but not so the male, who made incessant attempts to retire. It was a Saturday when I placed the couple on their new water; on Sunday, and, indeed, on every morning following, the male bird was to be found meandering about my father's garden. After a week's trial of this irritating discontent —during which the bird grew to know me and would undignifiedly retreat back into his pond on my making an appearance, never mind how distant—I grew weary of his company and decided to convey him back to his beloved one, and bring away the rightful husband of the bird I detained. Now during the monarch's absence the husband of my prisoner turned insurgent, married his late sovereign's wife, and having put down all opposition, established himself as king. But his reign was cut short. Directly I re-introduced the ancient monarch, who was tucked under my arm, a battle commenced which lasted two whole days, and resulted in the upstart being completely routed. They closed in, and each holding one wing of his opponent in his mandibles, fought

desperately with those at liberty, or often, regardless of all opposition, struck double blows first with the one wing and then with the other. Keat's swan—

> "Soft leaning on her fledgy breast,
> When to the stream she launches;"

Cowper's

> "Swan that graces the brook;"

and Montgomery's swan which—

> "Startled from her nest of reeds,
> Swells into beauty and, with curving crest,
> Cleaves the blue lake, with motion soft as rest,"

is above all things a tyrant.

If we would see the swan in all its natural glory we must not linger by the side of a luxuriously foliaged lake, but in winter, in

> "The cold and cruel winter,"

some untrodden sandy foreshore is the place to see swans at their best—

> "Descending with the stealthy tide."

There may be the developed beauty in the swan Montgomery pictures in the lines I have quoted, but there is not that unadorned grandeur which makes real the wild swan Shelley pictures in "Alastor"—

> "Beside a sluggish stream among the reeds."

Elegant and refined as is the domesticated bird, it is not so charming a sight as a skein of nine Siberian birds

driven from home by cold and hunger flying overhead. The whoop and the beating of mighty pinions is required to produce the swan at her grandest, and this I have witnessed as—

"The white-swans southward passed."

## DUCKS.

It has been stated that pigeons are the most beautiful birds ever brought under the influence of domestication. When we see white pigeons—Mr. Hamerton's favourites—revealing their marble forms, "in the intense sunshine of a southern summer, wheeling round some mediæval dovecote tower, with the dark-blue sky behind them," then truly we have a picture worthy our contemplation. Pigeon shapeliness may hold a pre-eminence amongst domesticated creatures which are swollen with degrading fat (a condition destructive alike of attraction of form and powers of flight), but their beauty of colour holds no position at all when compared with that gorgeousness which is alone possessed by ducks, both wild and domesticated.

We hear a great deal about the pulchritude of the kingfisher, whose individual beauty outshines that of all English birds, and the peacock's fine plumage is in the mind of every journalistic Jeames de la Pluche who wishes to convey to the minds of his readers the elegance and adornment of some *belle's* début at a country ball. But the kingfisher is only a single bird; the peacock stands alone too; the roller is scarcely common enough to be mentioned; the same may be written of the bee-

eater; and the oriole, lovely both in shape and colour, can hardly be termed brilliant. If, however, we would see beauty both in quantity and quality at the same time, we must leave the burrow of the halcyon and the pendent home of the oriole, and visit—

> "The sedentary fowl
> That seek yon pool, and there prolong their stay
> In silent congress; or together roused
> Take flight; while with their clang the air resounds."

How few poets have cared anything about the "sedentary fowl!" Wilson may be consulted, and in "Loch Winnock" a pleasing reference may be found. Burns, besides in his "Address to the Deil," which speaks of a

> "Drake on whistling wings,"

has something to tell us about "Scaring some wildfowl," and a few odd bits of information are dotted here and there in his works. Grahame has but little to say, and that in a poem entitled "The Wild Duck and her Brood." Somerville mentions duck in his "Field Sports"; Baillie, Shenstone, Spenser, Thomson, Leyden, and Crabbe give the bird a stately, nay a disdainful, smile; and Scott, as might almost be assumed, chiefly has it cowering—

> "In the fen
> Where stoops the hawk upon the glen."

Why ducks have not found more favour in prose and poetical literature has always been a mystery to me.

To say that these birds deserve better than they receive would be repeating a fact already too well known. If we would have liberality of colour, we have an unlimited field in the members of the *Anatidæ*. The scoters may not afford entertaining contemplation certainly, but what about the handsome shelduck, the "burrow duck," and his ruddy brother? The common mallard is beautiful all life, a rare thing amongst birds. When it leaves its shell, a fluffy duckling, clad in rich, soft, golden down, it is a picture in itself; and age, though it may stamp out the white collar which may be so frequently seen on a drake's neck, does not destroy the marvellous iridescence of its head. The gadwell can scarcely be termed beautiful, but the elegant teal, that smallest of our indigenous ducks, is a grand set-off. The shoveller's form may be spoilt somewhat by its heavy head, but who could wish to see anything more charming than the slender and symmetrically proportioned pintail? What shall I say of the garganey and wigeon? If the former possesses elegance of shape and plumage, the latter is coronated with a cream-white crown, and its green *speculum* glittering in the sun must be seen, it cannot be imagined. The two poachards are not entitled to the praise the other members of their family are, but they have a head and neck of brown which contrasts favourably with the snow of the winter's months. The ferruginous duck, the tufted duck, and the golden eye, who places her nest in the hollow of some tree, are too well known for me to bring them again to notice; but it

would be neglect were I not to mention that lovely but rare winter visitor, the green metallic-necked buffel-headed duck, the useful eider duck, with its green patches on either side of the head, and the long-tailed duck as elegant as the pintail. I admit that the king eider is not made beautiful even by its inner secondaries falling in curves over its wings, but to balance, nay to out-balance, the unhappy clumsiness of this strangely colour-divided bird we possess another arctic eider, know as Steller's, with a satin-white neck and a rich dark blue speculum, which will compare favourably with any tropical colour I have ever had the pleasure to see, and again we have the multi-coloured harlequin duck. The goosander and the three mergansers likewise belong to this category, and in passing through the *Anatidæ* we should not be justified in erasing their names. What is there more perfect than the glossy bottle-green of the head and upper neck of the goosander, or those feathers which compose the long filamentous crest of glossy green on the red-breasted merganser; or again that crescentic, mottled band of black which stretches over each side of the shoulders of the smew, and the fan-like, semicircular crest of black and white which so distinctly distinguishes the hooded bird? Whether ducks will ever gain that position in art and literature which is theirs so truly, is impossible to say; but it may be said, and that justly, that a throne long ursurped by other birds rightly belongs to them. Their colours claim for them a first place in English art, and

their life, their superior powers of wing, their swimming and walking, claim—if these things can claim—for these birds a high standpoint in the literature of the country they so unassumingly grace. Painters in both colours and words have yet to study ducks.

Wordsworth at least seems to have understood the intrinsic value of ducks in Nature, and the part they play in beautifying their surroundings. In verse he describes the evolutions water-fowl perform on a fine day towards the close of winter thus fascinatingly—

"Mark how the feathered tenants of the flood,
With grace of motion that might scarcely seem
Inferior to angelical, prolong
Their curious pastime! shaping in mid air
(And sometimes with ambitious wing that soars
High as the level of the mountain tops)
A circuit ampler than the lake beneath,
Their own domain; but ever, while intent
On tracing and retracing that large round,
Their jubilant activity evolves
Hundreds of curves and circles, to and fro,
Upward and downward, progress intricate
Yet unperplexed, as if one spirit swayed
Their indefatigable flight. 'Tis done—
Ten times, or more, I fancied it had ceased;
But lo! the vanished company again
Ascending; they approach—I hear their wings
Faint, faint at first; and then an eager sound
Past in a moment—and as fast again!
They tempt the water or the gleaming ice,
To show them a fair image; 'tis themselves,
Their own fair forms, upon the glimmering plain,
Painted more soft and fair as they descend

Almost to touch; then up again aloft,
Up with a sally and a flash of speed,
As if they scorned both resting-place and rest!"

These lines on water-fowl stand totally unparalleled in beauty in the English language and literature pertaining to the subject. No poet has written anything touching the *Anatidæ* to equal them; they shine like an electric spark among the dull extracts of other writings. They are what they are because their writer was a naturalist-poet as well as an artist-poet. At the same time, Wordsworth never loses sight of the fact that the duck—lark-like—has generally a lowly nest, for he writes in a sonnet of one he saw on an island of Rydal water—

"The imperial consort of the fairy-king
Owns not a sylvan bower; or gorgeous cell
With emerald floored, and with purpureal shell
Ceilinged and roofed; that is so fair a thing
As this low structure—for the tasks of spring,
Prepared by one who loves the buoyant swell
Of the brisk waves, yet here consents to dwell;
And spreads in steadfast peace her brooding wing.
Words cannot paint the o'ershadowing yew-tree bough
And dimly-gleaming nest, a hollow crown
Of golden leaves inlaid with silver down,
Fine as the mother's softest plumes allow.
I gazed—and self-accused while gazing, sighed
For human kind, weak slave of cumbrous pride!"

If we need further proof that Wordsworth is writing about birds which live and breed about his home, we have only to recall to mind the lines—

"So have ye seen the fowler chase
On Grasmere's clear unruffled breast
A youngling of the wild-duck's nest
With deftly-lifted oar."

"Wild-fowl" which evince a partiality for sedgy pools and rear their young in the vicinity of fresh water, should not be confused with "sea-fowl" which make their homes at sea, and as Mr. Harting points out, "rear their young upon its shelving beach or frowning cliffs and, *except on an emergency are seldom cooked and eaten.*"

Wordsworth, like his great predecessor, Shakespeare, has recognised both; we have in his writings to represent the former the—

"Goslings green
. . . . . .
And cautious water-fowl, from distant climes,
Fixed at their seat, the centre of the mere."

And again, when further he localises "water-fowl" by saying—

"Where the duck dabbles 'mid the rustling sedge
And feeding pike starts from the water's edge."

On the other hand, sea-fowl are specified where the Lake poet in "Evening Voluntaries" says—

"The sun is couched, the sea-fowl gone to rest."

# Book VIII.

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# COLUMBÆ.

*BOOK VIII.*

# COLUMBÆ.

STOCK-DOVE. TURTLE-DOVE.

## THE STOCK-DOVE.

ONE critic at least has invited ornithological Wordsworthians to stop and quibble over what he regards as an "inadmissible" allegation. "Nor, in their remarks on the dove's nesting," says this guide to poetical divergencies, "is there any information given to establish the identity of species. Thus—

> 'The stock-dove builds her nest
> Where the wild flowers' odours float,'

is too indefinite a localisation to do more than satisfy vaguely, while Cunningham's hint of its nesting in the grove is suspicious, *and Wordsworth's*—

'True as the stock-dove to her shallow nest
And to the grove that holds it,'

*is in Wordsworth especially inadmissible, for the stock-dove does not build in trees, but (by preference) in rabbit-holes.* Yet Cowper hankers after a pine-tree stock-dove, and Thomson, so frequently inaccurate in his remarks on Nature, makes it a forest bird."

What an exposition of turgid and impetuous animadversion! This piece of scholarly remonstrance against the wilfulness of the Muses might have been hereafter of considerable account had not its compiler, in his eagerness to censure, deviated himself somewhat from the circumscribed paths of veracity. I say had not the author of this *outré* passage been carried away with a desire to point out the faults of others at the peril of exposing himself, literature might have been the richer, but as it chances, in revealing the putative errors of others, he has burdened ornithology with one of his own.

Has the writer forgotten, or repudiated his better understanding for the convenience of hitting Wordsworth another blow, that *stock* is derived from the ancient Sanscrit; that in the verse, "Though the root thereof was old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground, yet through the scent of water it will bud and bring forth boughs like a plant," Job supplies us with an explanation vastly superior to that erroneous supposition which declares that *stock* signifies this bird was the origin of our

domestic breed? Has he forgotten that a *stock* is a stem, a main body of a tree or plant, a fixed, strong, firm part —in a word, a trunk? If he has forgotten this, then there is an excuse, but if he has remembered it, let him explain why he has so wofully ignored the learning of his forefathers; let him explain his own words, "the stock-dove does not build in trees"; and I ask him to state what doves those are that inhabit the wooded crags near Ventnor, in the Isle of Wight, if not stock-doves (*Columba œnas*). Wordsworth's two lines are far too correct to be marred by the meddling of a writer whose theme throughout his work is overstrung with wearying complaint.

Though correct in this censured instance, there can be no doubt Wordsworth confused the wood-pigeon or ring-dove and the stock-dove. Indeed one might very well say his "stock-dove" is truly the wood-pigeon (*Columba palumbus*). Evidently Wordsworth is alluding to the voice of the ringed bird, and not to the stock-dove, when he says—

> "I heard a stock-dove sing or say
> His homely tale this very day;
> His voice was buried among trees,
> Yet to be come at by the breeze;
> He did not cease; but cooed and cooed,
> And somewhat pensively he wooed:
> He sang of love with quiet blending,
> Slow to begin, and never-ending,
> Of serious faith and inward glee;
> That was the song—the song for me!"

We can hardly suppose Wordsworth admired the voice of the stock-dove more than the melody of the nightingale! or that the "stock-dove" loves to brood over a voice which has been compared rightly to a grunt. We can imagine, albeit, a wood-pigeon proud of his sweet *coo rōō ; coo coo.*

In "A Morning Exercise," we find Wordsworth referring to a dove which brings our minds back to the stock-dove again—

> "Faithful, though swift as lightning, the meek dove,
> Yet more hath Nature reconciled in thee;
> So constant with thy downward eye of love,
> Yet, in aerial singleness, so free;
> So humble, yet so ready to rejoice
> In power of wing and never-wearied voice!"

Though a swift flyer, the wood-pigeon's powers of flight are not so great as those possessed by the lesser bird. Even the turtle-dove flies at a superior rate to the ring-dove, and the rock-dove and stock-dove are extremely swift and strong of wing.

At the best we can only surmise which dove Wordsworth had in his mind when he wrote the verse I have just quoted and such lines as—

> "Thoughts of love
> Should bear him to his sister dear
> With motion fleet as winged dove;"

and—

> "Brood with the dove."

## THE TURTLE-DOVE.

THE Turtle-dove (*Turtur communis*), that general favourite of the poets, has been but indifferently acknowledged by the Lake poet. Being himself free from all sickly and youthful sentimentalism, Wordsworth would naturally have little appreciation of the "love-sick turtles,"* "the kind turtle's pure untainted love,"† "too saintlike turtle,"‡ or that imaginary "chaste" turtle which is—

> "Sober, yet gentle, wise, yet free." §

Wordsworth's chief ambition would save him from using the bird as a simile of love, and its summer migratory habits, limited northern distribution, and remarkably tortuous flight amongst trees, would make it a scarce item in the life sights of Wordsworth. His poem, "The Poet and the caged Turtle-dove," is as much as we can justifiably expect :—

> "As often as I murmur here
> My half-formed melodies,
> Straight from her osier mansion near,
> The turtle-dove replies:

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* Gilbert White. † Gay. ‡ Prior. § Prior.

Though silent as a leaf before,
  The captive promptly coos;
Is it to teach her own soft lore,
  Or second my weak muse?

"I rather think the gentle dove
  Is murmuring a reproof,
Displeased that I from lays of love
  Have dared to keep aloof;
That I, a Bard of hill and dale,
  Have carolled, fancy free,
As if nor dove, nor nightingale,
  Had heart or voice for me.

"If such thy meaning, O forbear,
  Sweet bird! to do me wrong;
Love, blessed love, is everywhere
  The spirit of my song;
'Mid grove, and by the calm fireside,
  Love animates my lyre;
That coo again!—'tis not to chide,
  I feel, but to inspire."

# Book IX.

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# GALLINÆ

*BOOK IX.*

# GALLINÆ.

THE DOMESTIC FOWL—GROUSE—QUAIL.

## THE DOMESTIC FOWL.

THE

"Cock that crows,"

the

"Fowl domestic;"

Chanticleer, with his numerous harem, sacred to both Jupiter's victim Æsculapius, the life-restoring physician, and the product of his brain, Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and war; emblem of Mars, the war god; little wonder that the

Cock, single in his domain,

has played a prominent *rôle* in the poetry of this country! Chaucer gave the early poets the key-note; Dryden, for the benefit of his followers, records in verse the sad romance of Sir Chanticleer and his dame

Partlet. Poetry bubbles over with illustrations, similes, and conceits drawn from the demeanour, customs, and manners of Cunningham's

"Bold chanticleer, in shiny plumage gay,"

who

"Struts on before and leads the well-known way."

In "An Evening Walk," Wordsworth has penned the lines—

"Sweetly ferocious,* round his native walks,
Pride of his sister-wives, the monarch stalks:
Spur-clad his nervous feet, and firm his tread;
A crest of purple tops his warrior head.
Bright sparks his black and rolling eye-ball hurls
Afar, his tail he closes and unfurls;
On tiptoe reared, he strains his clarion throat,
Threatened by faintly-answering farms remote;
Again with his shrill voice the mountain rings,
While, flapped with conscious pride, resound his wings."

Wordsworth has referred several times to the cock as

"The day's shrill trumpeter." †

In the "Excursion" he writes—

"The bird of dawn
Did never rouse the cottagers from sleep
With startling summons." ‡

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* "Dolcemente feroce"—Tasso. † Mackay: "Mountain Top."

‡ There is a faint chance of Wordsworth's words "startling summons" having a double significance. Mr. Harting, in his "Ornithology of Shakespeare," points out that Steevens has shown that the popular notion of a phantom disappearing at cock-crow is of very ancient date. "The conversation of Bernardo, Horatio,

Again, in the same poem, alluding to the cock's habit of early matin singing, he writes—

> "Roused by the crowing cock at dawn of day,
> I yet had risen too late to interchange
> A morning salutation with my host."

And setting forth the characteristic of hermitage, he says, in the continuation of his sonnet "Seclusion"—

> "Nor should e'en the crested fowl
> From thorp or vill his matin sound for me,
> Freed of the world and all its industry."

Nor does the beauty of "the cock's shrill clarion"* escape the notice of the poet, for his poem, "Written in March, while resting on the bridge at the foot of Brothers' Water"—a poem which recounts the most beautiful phases of advancing summer—opens with the verse—

> "The cock is crowing,
> The stream is flowing,
> The small birds twitter,
> The lake doth glitter,
> The green field sleeps in the sun;
> The oldest and youngest
> Are at work with the strongest,
> The cattle are grazing,
> Their heads never raising,
> There are forty feeding like one."

---

and Marcellus, on the subject of Hamlet's ghost," says Mr. Harting, "affords a good illustration of this"—

> "*Bern.* It was about to speak, when the cock crew!
> *Hor.* And then it started like a guilty thing
> Upon a fearful summons."

* Gray: "Elegy."

Considering, however, what an important dignitary this "vainglorious fool"* is, and how his heraldic life abounds with interesting particularities, I marvel why his "wonted strut" has not reaped him a greater harvest of poetical admiration. The cock still needs a patron as badly as the thrush! Think of the bird's importance in the old barbarous days, when two cocks were pitted to fight until death followed blindness in the circumscribed arena! Ah! in the days departed at least Chanticleer—or mayhap the peacook—and the magpie, were a kind of testament by which man swore; he reached his climax of faith "by cock and pie!"†

Concerning Nature, the poets have been eager to remember—

"The cock high mounted"

on a reeking dunghill, and too ready to neglect the hen, who, in defence of her little ones, I have known to kill a matured rat. So with mythology. Jonson may impart to us the well-known actuality—

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* Cowper.

† This may and may not be the outcome of a minced oath. We come across *cock's bones*, *cock's wounds*, *cock's mother*, *cock's body*, *cock's passion*, where we can have no doubt the word stands for the sacred name which should never be taken in vain. The "Pie," says the Rev. Dr. Brewer, "is the table or rule in the old Roman offices, showing how to find out the services for each day, called by the Greeks *pi'nax* (an index). The later part of the oath is equivalent to the 'Mass Book.'"

"When men a dangerous disease did 'scape
Of old, they gave a cock to Esculape";*

but who has been bold enough to tell us aught else about unloyal Alectryon? Moreover, did not Mahomet find in the first heaven a cock of such gigantic size, that its crest touched the second heaven; and is it not alleged that the crowing of this celestial bird arouses every living creature from sleep except man? The Moslem doctors say that Allah lends a willing ear to him who reads the Koran, to him who prays for pardon, and to the cock whose chant is divine melody. When Mahomet's cock ceases to crow, the day of judgment will not be far off! Besides, Chanticleer is dedicated to Apollo, the sun-god, because it gives notice of the rising of the sun. Likewise it was dedicated to Mercury, because it summons men to business by its crowing. And have the poets never thought why the warlike ensign of the cock is so often found in gilded iron on church spires? Have they never heard that the idol Nergal was the most universal idol of the ancient Phœnicians, Indians, and Persians? and Nergal means a *dunghill cock!*

Carew reminds us that there is a legend to the fact that—

"Ghosts fly away
When the shrill cock proclaims the infant day,"

yet who thinks to mention our various and different

* Epigram.

breeds have originally descended from a common, wild, Indian ancestor, an Adam cock?

Of "Chearfull Chaunticlere," "the clam'rous hen," and Gay's "white-legged chickens," they tell us but little; it is chiefly as a possessor of a rich voice that the poets sing of the cock; they speak of the hen as "careful" and zealous, of the young as inexperienced, chirping, and, regardless of all comparison, "feeble!"

In "The Female Vagrant," Wordsworth alludes to the

> "Hen's rich neck through long grass scarce espied,"

and in the "White Doe of Rylstone" we read—

> "How the people are flocking in
> Like hungry fowls* to the feeder's hand
> When snow lies heavy upon the land."

Generally the hen of the poets is either with her

> "Tender chicken brood,"

defending them with fearless vigour, or wontedly "cackling."

The most noteworthy of Wordsworth's references is his truly original and pretty simile of adoption to be found in the "Excursion":—

> "He had long existed in the state
> Of a young fowl beneath one mother hatched—
> Though from another sprung—of different kind."

---

* The word "fowls" may have a general purport.

## THE GROUSE.

MORRIS compares the Red Grouse (*Lagopus Scoticus*) to the Red Indian, who gives way before the inroads of cultivation, and flourishes only where Nature is yet to be seen in her primitive loveliness. How many more years this bird will retain a foothold in England it is impossible to say, but ere long we may expect its total absence from all grounds lower in elevation than one thousand feet above the level of the sea.

The "heathcock," "gawcock," "gorcock," "moorcock," "moorfowl," "muirfowl," as it is indiscriminately and differently termed, is gradually being forced into those wild regions which Sir Walter Scott has immortalized. Yorkshire and Derbyshire are still plentifully provided with birds; Westmorland can still boast of her

"Mountains by the heathcock ranged,"*

but I earnestly doubt whether another hundred years will hear the *kok, kok, kok* of the warning male, on the southern portion of the great Pennine range.

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* "Excursion: Churchyard among the Mountains" (*continued*).

## THE QUAIL.

PERPETUALLY, for upwards of three thousand three hundred years, enormous multitudes of Quails (*Coturnix vulgaris*) have been migrating hither and thither through the ether of space like herrings through the waters of the seas. For four or five centuries the English poet has practically refused to notice the bird; it has to them been but a useless tool left out in the night air to rust. Strange to say, the quail's almost unlimited geographical range has not brought it into the scope of the poet's illustrative *similescopes*; and further, its small size has done much to shield the poets from the strictures of their too numerous critics.

Individually, however, the quail is not an extraordinarily interesting bird. Like the game-cock, it possesses a distinct relish for battle. At the present day quail fighting—an amusement which requires a cultivated taste—is common in parts of Italy and China. We read that Solon, of Salamis, one of the seven wise men of Greece, directed that quails should be made to fight in the presence of the Athenian youths, in order to inflame their zeal and courage, and that the Romans held quail-fighting in still higher estimation. Augustus punished a prefect of Egypt with death for buying and bringing to table a quail which had acquired celebrity by its victories. In Italy, the practice is to

gorge two quails, and then, placing them at either end of a long table, throw between them a few grains of millet seed. After some preliminary delay, a deadly contest usually takes place, and one is forced to give in.

Although this kind of pastime may be exceedingly attractive to those who have not the power to appreciate anything which does not destroy its object, bring it within the precincts of death, or exhibit brute determination and unimagined suffering, to my mind by far the most seductive phase in the life-history of quails are those vast flocks which not only afforded the Israelites of old miraculous provision, but bring them forward into a present-day light where they can reflect their Creator's wonderful work. Without exception, wherever we find quails specified in the Bible, we read of them in mighty numbers. "The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God. And it came to pass that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp." (Ex. xvi., 11-13). On a subsequent occasion, when at Kibroth Hattaavah, the people repined for flesh, "There went forth a wind from the Lord, and brought quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp, as it were a day's journey on this side, and as it were a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and as it were two cubits high upon the face of the earth. And the people stood up all that

day, and all that night, and all the next day, and they gathered the quails: he that gathered least gathered ten homers" * (Numb. xi. 31, 32). "Then the Lord rained flesh upon them as dust, and feathered fowls like as the sand of the sea" (Ps. lxxvii. 27). "The people asked, and he brought quails" (Ps. cv. 40). Colonel Sykes states that the common quail is the identical species which was furnished to the Israelites when they complained for flesh in the wilderness, and the Colonel's words are borne out by the fact that the word used in the original Hebrew for quail (*selav*) is the same as that by which the bird is now known to the Arabians (*salwa*), a name derived from a root signifying to be fat. It is, moreover, well understood that the common quail migrates in huge numbers, and regularly crosses the Arabian desert, flying for the most part at night. In spring, whole bevies are slaughtered on Malta and many of the Greek isles. "So vast and countless," says Gould, "are the flocks which often pass over to the islands and European shores of the Mediterranean, that a mode of wholesale slaughter is usually put in practice against them, a circumstance which no doubt tends to limit their inordinate increase." To give an idea of the numbers of the quails, I quote a passage written by a French naturalist:—"One may get an idea of the prodigious number of victims which the simple crossing

* For a learned explanation of this statement the reader should see Canon Tristram's excellent work, "The Natural History of the Bible."

of the Mediterranean costs the species, by two well-known and often-quoted facts. The Bishop of Capri, on a wretched islet, scarcely a league in length, which lies at the entrance of the Bay of Naples, used to clear a net revenue of 25,000 francs a year (£1,000) by its quails. This sum represents 150,000 quails at the lowest computation. In certain islands of the Archipelago, and parts of the coast of Peloponnese, the inhabitants, men and women, have no other occupation during two months of the year than that of collecting quails, which are showered on them from heaven, picking and cleaning them, salting them, and packing them away in casks for transportation to the principal markets of the Levant; that is to say, the migration of quails is to this part of Greece what the migration of herrings is to Holland and Scotland. The quail catchers arrive at the shore a fortnight in advance, and every man numbers his ground to avoid disputes."

Our forefathers knew a good deal about this little plump and exquisitely pencilled bird. Lucretius pointed out in a philosophical manner how one creature's food is another creature's poison, exemplifying the manner in which goats and quails fatten on hellebore, poisonous to man. Aristotle knew that they waited for the wind, and flew with it, never facing it, like many birds do. The elder Pliny tells marvellous tales of their migration. "They reach us," says the victim of his own curiosity, "before the cranes come, small though they be, and when they do come, come on the

ground to us rather than through the air. As they draw near land, it is not without peril to ships; for they often light on their sails, and that in the night too, in such numbers that the ships sink under the weight. They come by certain well-known resting places, and never fly with the south wind, as it is damp and heavy; but they like to be borne on the wings of the wind, inasmuch as they have heavy bodies for their size and small strength. Their cries on arrival tell of the extreme labour it has been; so they choose the north wind, and fly with a mother quail to guide them. A hawk kills all that land. On their return they always solicit an escort, so the bird called bee-eater, the horned owl, and ortolan fly away with them." What Pliny meant by a "mother quail" has been subject to discussion. He probably refers to simply a larger and fatter bird then any of the bevy, yet the name has been taken to specify the landrail by some naturalists.

Wordsworth, in "The French and the Spanish Guerillas," has written—

> "As a flight
> Of scattered quails by signs to re-unite."

Whether or no the "mother" bird binds the whole company to her like a queen-bee her workers, or whether the trinity Pliny names do the martialling, is for naturalists to say; but this I am persuaded to believe, that the rapidly repeated *peek-whit-whit*, their call-note, is used to collect stragglers to the main body during their nocturnal movements.

# Book X.

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# ALECTORIDES.

*BOOK X.*

# ALECTORIDES.

## THE BUSTARD.

FOUR hundred years or so ago, the Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*) used to breed on the moors, extensive downs, and plains of southernly England. Enclosure, the continual planting of trees, and above all, the increase of population, have sounded the death-knell of the bustard as a common object in either Berkshire, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, or on the downs of Sussex and the wolds of Lincolnshire. The first ten years of this present century saw the extinction of the few straggling members of this bird indigenous to the Plains of Salisbury. The survivor of former droves on the eastern Wolds of Yorkshire was caught in 1832-33, and in Norfolk and Suffolk the last fertile eggs were taken about 1838, though a few birds lingered somewhat later. The British Isles—England at least—are now seldom invaded by wandering visitors, and Wordsworth was indeed blessed with that break-down of his chaise which forced him to travel Salisbury Plain on foot. To see a bustard

rise on its strong wings against the wind was sufficient reward for his trivial misfortune. His lines, to be found in "Guilt and Sorrow,"* besides being a registration of the bird's existence on the Plain in 1840, are technically superior, compared with the written history of the bird, for I have never seen a living bustard at freedom, to any I have yet read—

> "Hurtle the clouds in deeper darkness piled,
> Gone is the raven timely rest to seek;
> He seemed the only creature in the wild
> On whom the elements their rage might wreak;
> Save that the bustard, of those regions bleak
> Shy tenant, seeing by the uncertain light
> A man there wandering, gave a mournful shriek,
> And half upon the ground, with strange affright,
> Forced hard against the wind a thick unwieldy flight."

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* "The Female Vagrant."

# Book XI.

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# LIMICOLÆ.

*BOOK XI.*

# LIMICOLÆ.

RINGED PLOVER—GOLDEN PLOVER—WOODCOCK—SNIPE—SANDPIPER.

## THE RINGED PLOVER.

THE author of "Noah's Ark," with less judgment than he usually uses, criticising Wordsworth's passage—

> "Along the river's stony marge
> The sand-lark chants a joyous song,"

says Wordsworth has also a "sand-lark" which "chants a joyous song," but it is not easy to guess what bird he meant. It is the *unique specimen of its species.* Does Mr. Phil Robinson forget that there exists a "sand-lark," as it is locally called, with a truly beautiful voice? In the couplet I have quoted, Wordsworth simply and characteristically refers to the melodious whistle of the Ringed Plover (*Ægialitis hiaticula*), the "stone-hatch" or "sand-lark" of different locations, and not to any member of the *Alaudidæ* family.

## THE GOLDEN PLOVER.

DWELLERS in towns often hear by night the sharp, clear, whistled *tlui* or the *tirr-pēē-yŏu* of the Golden Plover (*Charadrius pluvialis*), as it migrates overhead in the dark from the south, during the later part of September to the middle of November. This is most probably the cry, the passing halloo of the

"Plover of the moors,"*

a bird which has its breeding-place on moorland wastes, forms its slight and scantily lined nest in some depression in short grass or heather, and may be seen in clouds of enormous numbers when collected for passage. This bird most likely was the plover which to Wordsworth's ears

"Screamed with tumult harsh."

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* Peter Bell.

## THE WOODCOCK.

ALREADY in my notice of Wordsworth's treatment of the bittern I have referred to the passage to be found in "An Evening Walk"—

> "In youth's keen eye the livelong day was bright,
> The sun at morning, and the stars of night;
> Alike when heard the bittern's hollow bill
> Or the first woodcocks roamed the moonlight hill."

Whether Wordsworth a second time indicates the Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*), in his "Descriptive Sketches," when he says—

> "Followed by drowsy crow of midnight cock,"

it is difficult to affirm with any amount of certainty. To my mind this refers to the deep, whistling note uttered by the male as he follows along those glades in woods known as "cockroads," and not to the domestic cock as so frequently thought.

## THE SNIPE.

LIKE his brother poets, Wordsworth has little to say about the Snipe (*Gallinago cœlestis*). The common snipe is a migrant which will shift its ground under the influence of weather, and a bird, moreover, which prefers the marshes of Suffolk, Norfolk, and Lincolnshire even to the elevations of Westmorland and Cumberland, although on the latter it is distributed generally. The drumming or "bleating" sound which this bird appears to make with the action of its wings, slightly assisted by the expanded tail feathers, seems to have been unknown to Wordsworth, yet—

"The darting snipe"

did not escape his observation.

## THE COMMON SANDPIPER.

ALONG with the stonechat Wordsworth mentions the Sandpiper (*Totanus hypoleucos*) :—

> "Strange! these gloomy boughs
> Had charms for him; and here he loved to sit,
> His only visitants a straggling sheep,
> The stonechat, or the glancing sandpiper."

Those who have taken the little trouble to hide themselves near the gravelly margin of some favourite lake where the sandpiper is known to haunt the banks, or on an islet of shingle with scanty herbage, can appreciate these lines, left upon a seat in a yew-tree, which stands near the lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the shore, where a magnificent prospect is, as I have said before, commanded.

# Book XII.

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## GAVIÆ.

*BOOK XII.*

# GAVIÆ.

## SEA-FOWL.

"From their cradles up,
With but a step between their several homes,
Twins had they been in pleasure; after strife
And petty quarrels, had grown fond again:
Each other's advocate, each other's stay;
And strangers to content if long apart,
Or more divided than a sportive pair
Of sea-fowl, conscious both that they are hovering
Within the eddy of a common blast,
Or hidden only by the concave depth
Of neighbouring billows from each other's sight."

THUS does Wordsworth compare Vandracour's and Julia's love for each other to a pair of sea-fowl floating on the waves of a great unknown ocean; the simile is rich in common lustre and originality. Perfect Nature—perfect seaside Nature—has her hidden grandeur revealed or concealed just as her gulls are absent or present. What are those sandy tracks to the eye without there are gulls in either the foreground or the distance? The margin of every sea, to be perfect, must have some sea-fowl flying

around or skimming the water, now wailing, now squealing to each other as they pass and re-pass and circle in the air. And just so much as the intensity of the struggle for existence increases does the beauty of these birds become developed. There is untold beauty in the green wave and azure sky, but the picture—present it when you will—needs its accents of foam-flake and cloud repeating by the white flash of some wind-belated gull; some gull, storm-bound; some sea-fowl either battling against the imposing elements, or competing for life. Who wants a gull with a charming voice? If the melodious nightingale and lark make Nature rich to the ear, so do the songless gulls make her all majestic to the eye. "There are places," says Mr. Hamerton, "on the wild coasts where sea-fowl can no more be omitted by the painter than mankind in the streets of cities. Their cities are the inaccessible cliffs, whose grandeur gains enormously by their tumultuous clouds of wings. No mist-wreath or Alpine precipice has the majesty of those unnumbered multitudes; no song in southern woodland has the poetry of their discordant cries. Behind them the iron-bound coast, where their nests are made; below them—a thousand feet below them—the restless, pitiless breakers that cast the wreck against the rock; in front of them the unquiet plain of waters, storm-swept, inhospitable, without one friendly bough, or any sheltering eaves! Truly these creatures have a stern and drear existence, and there is a watchful gravity in

their aspect altogether different from the light-headedness of the sylvan songsters. They are not happy as chirping sparrows are happy, but have something of the ocean's melancholy, and the grave bearing of hard-living fishermen, the toilers of the sea!"

Yes; beautiful as are the cliffs and stretches of sand, with the sea murmuring a song, with the wind everlastingly in the distance, they need something to break their lovely monotony. Just as the swan supplies that want on the untroubled river, the sea-fowl supplies it on the angry sea and the barren shore. Nature is beautiful; never mind how dreary her primitive aspect is, yet she is made sublimely grand when we have

> "The sportive sea-gull dancing with the waves,"

as if its only ambition was to mock their furious powers.

The sea-gull, Wordsworth reminds us, was among the Druids an emblem of those traditions connected with the deluge that made an important part of their mysteries—

> "Screams round the arch-druid's brow the seamew white
> As Menai's foam."

And the name "seamew" is again used by the poet in his "Excursion"—

> "Seamews from afar
> Hovering above these inland solitudes,
> By the rough wind, unscattered at whose call,
> Their voyage was begun!"